

# Raising children in poverty in the richest nation

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*Factors that may encourage the adoption of Dutch inspired Youth and Family Centers*

Heather A. Hager  
3901122  
Master's Thesis Project  
Social Policy and Social Interventions  
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Utrecht University  
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To me poor people are like bonsai trees. When you plant the best seed of the tallest tree in a flower-pot, you get a replica of the tallest tree, only inches tall. There is nothing wrong with the seed you planted, only the soil-base that is too inadequate. Poor people are bonsai people. There is nothing wrong in their seeds. Simply, society never gave them the base to grow on. All it needs to get the poor people out of poverty for us to create an enabling environment for them. Once the poor can unleash their energy and creativity, poverty will disappear very quickly.

Muhammad Yunus, 2006  
Nobel Peace Prize recipient for work on poverty and development

### Abstract

Despite the vast wealth of the United States, it retains one of the highest child poverty rates of advanced nations. Guided by the family stress model illustrating how early exposure to adversity and toxic stress can have detrimental outcomes for child development, assessing what social supports can ease stresses of raising children in poverty can help to promote happier healthier children. Incorporating Sen's capability approach, the resource of Youth and Family Centers in the Netherlands is discussed for its feasibility in an American context. National responses to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, sociopolitical views of parenting and childhood, and Dutch policies and institutions for parenting support are discussed. Features in the Dutch implementation of Youth and Family centers like decentralization, links to early childhood education services, parenting programs that help to reduce stresses, as well as prenatal, postnatal, and infant care are highlighted for their potential in promoting similar interventions in the United States.

*Keywords:* child poverty, family stress model, Sen's capability approach, Dutch parenting support, American family policies, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, parenting, childhood, & Youth and Family Centers

The national ethos of the American Dream promotes ideals of freedom, equality, and opportunity where hard work and perseverance are rewarded with success and prosperity. Additionally, virtues of individualism, self-reliance, and a strong work ethic encourage people to overcome impoverished backgrounds by their own means, giving way to cultural clichés such as “pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.” Yet studies on upward economic mobility and the cyclical nature of poverty illustrate that the attainment of the American Dream is out of reach for most poor children (Corcoran, 1995; DeBacker, Heim, Panousi, Ramnath, & Vindangos, 2013; Korenman, Miller, & Sjaastad, 1994). While a mere 4% of poor children may accomplish a ‘Hollywood style’ rags to riches climb up the economic ladder, the vast majority of children born into poor families are likely to stay poor as adults (Pew Economic Mobility Project, 2012).

In the United States, over sixteen million children live in families below the federal poverty limit, nearly three million of whom live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than \$2 per day (Schaefer & Edin, 2011). Despite being the richest nation in the world, the United States possesses one of the highest child poverty rates among advanced industrialized nations with nearly a quarter (23.1%) of children growing up in poor families. Child poverty is estimated to cost United States roughly \$500 billion (about 4% GDP) annually by reducing the productivity and economic output by 1.3% GDP, increasing cost of crime by 1.3% GDP, and raising health expenditures by 1.3% GDP (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2008). Data on before and after taxes and transfers shows many other nations have enacted family policies and dedicated public funds towards tackling and reducing child poverty (Unicef, 2013). However, the United States has never pursued a federal response to child poverty and many of those who qualify for current anti-poverty assistance do not receive it (Shanks & Danzinger, 2011). ‘Family policy’ has yet to become a widely recognized or commonly used term by American policymakers, journalists, and the public (Bogenschneider, 2011).

Both Harvard University’s Center on the Developing Child and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) have dedicated recent research towards investigating the effects of hardship or adversity early in life and towards what policies and programs to foster healthy development in formative years. “Positive stress” is an essential part of healthy development and “tolerable stress” is inevitable in the event of natural disasters, loss of a loved one, or a frightening injury. However, “toxic stress,” which occurs when children are exposed to strong, frequent, or prolonged adversity, can “disrupt the development of the brain architecture and other organ systems, and increase the risk for stress-related diseases and cognitive impairment well into adult years” (Harvard CDC, 2013;

AAP, 2012). Adverse childhood experiences can result in unhealthy lifestyles for adults, who may use coping mechanisms such as drugs, tobacco, alcohol, obesity, gambling, or promiscuity and can lead to risk factors for poor health and early death (AAP, 2012). Children living in families below the poverty line are also more likely to experience substandard housing, inadequate nutrition and food insecurity, inadequate childcare, lack of access to healthcare, unsafe neighborhoods, and under resourced schools (American Psychological Association, 2013).

### **Born into poverty**

The effects of growing up poor often begin before a child is even born. Important prenatal care for a child begins *in utero*, involving regular doctor check-ups, prenatal vitamins, abstaining from certain toxins in foods and drinks, as well as preparing both financially and emotionally. Proper and beneficial prenatal care lays the foundation for early development. In the United States, one out of every two pregnancies is unintended. When controlled for socioeconomic demographics however, the rate of unintended pregnancies among poor women increases to more than five times that of women in the highest income level; poor women are also less likely to end an unplanned pregnancy by abortion (Finer & Zolna, 2011). Unintended pregnancies can result in unintended childbearing which has an increase risk of adverse behaviors such as inadequate or delayed initiation of prenatal care, smoking and drinking during pregnancy, premature birth, lack of breastfeeding, as well as negative physical and mental effects on children (Finer & Zolna, 2011). Regardless of whether one attributes unplanned pregnancies to risky sexual behaviors, lack of access, affordability of contraception and prenatal care, or cultural mores, unplanned pregnancies among low-income women result in millions of children each year brought into homes that had not planned and prepared for them. Being poor during pregnancy increases stresses and struggles for many women, which can result in negative effects for both the mother and the baby (Braveman, Marchi, Egerter, Kim, Metzler, Stancil, & Libet, 2008; Conger, 2005; Finer & Zolna, 2011). A recent survey of low-income women who recently gave birth illustrated the following prevalence of hardships during pregnancy:

- 29% of low income women reported suffering from food insecurity.
- 26% had bills they were unable to pay.
- 18% reported economic hardship.
- 13 to 14% experienced losing their own or their partner's job.
- 11% suffered separation or divorce.

- 13 to 20% reported a lack of practical and emotional support. (Braveman et al., 2008)

These prenatal stresses can pose risk to a baby's healthy development. Adverse pregnancy outcomes from severe stresses, obesity, alcohol use, tobacco consumption, depression, and short timing between pregnancies are more likely among poor women, all of which can contribute to preterm deliveries and low birth weights (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Nagahawatte & Goldenberg, 2008). Poor, less educated, and minority women have been shown more likely to be hospitalized for assault while pregnant; the effects of severe violence in pregnancy can also reduce a child's birth weight (Aizer, 2010; Nagahawatte & Goldenberg, 2008). Low birth weights have been associated with serious physical disabilities, grade repetition, learning disabilities, lower levels of intelligence, and are considered a key risk factor for infant mortality (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

### **The family stress model**

Data from a national survey by American Psychological Association on stress in America, confirms that not only are American parents are stressed, but that stress has also manifested into physical health issues for millions (APA, 2010). On a scale of 1 to 10, the majority of Americans are living with a moderate (4-7) level of stress (APA, 2010). The most common physical symptoms of stress reported were irritability (45%), fatigue (41%) and lack of energy or motivation (38%). Additionally, while the majority (69%) of parents think that their stress has little or no impact on their children, an overwhelming 91% of children surveyed reported that they knew when their parents were stressed, due to behaviors such as yelling, arguing, and complaining (APA, 2010). Importantly, these findings are of a national sample, not controlled for those living in poverty, although one can infer that the symptoms, effects, and levels of stress likely increase under economic hardship.

Family stress models offer a theoretical framework for how economic hardship affects parenting behaviors and child outcomes. The framework maintains that low-income parents may have difficulty obtaining basic material needs like nutritious food and clothing, paying bills, or cutting back on necessary expenses like health insurance or medical care. These economic stresses can then manifest into emotional distress, such as depression, anxiety, anger, alienation, substance abuse, and antisocial behaviors. These psychological stresses can then negatively affect caregiver relationships. As a result, parenting behaviors may be harsh or inconsistent, relatively uninvolved, and low in nurturance and affection. Ultimately, this puts children at risk for decreases in cognitive

ability, social competence, school success, and attachment to parents; increasing depression and anxiety, and externalizing aggression and antisocial behavior (Barnett, 2008; Conger, 2005).

Economically, poverty strains families since they may have difficulty affording basic resources, but it also weighs on the emotions, relationships, and interactions of those in families who are suffering from economic hardships. The family stress model offer a deeper understanding of how economic stresses can influence parenting behavior by asserting that the financial stresses and difficulties of living in poverty have an adverse effect on parent's emotions, behaviors, and relationships, which in turn affects their parenting or socialization practices negatively affecting the lives of both parents and children (Barnett, 2008; Conger, 2005).

The relationship between poverty and harsher parenting behaviors sheds light onto increased risks for maltreatment among poor families (Beckmann, Knitzer & Dicker, 2010; Conger, 2005). The usage of the family stress model is in no way an excuse for harsh parenting, but rather a call for intervention to reduce the stresses on families in poverty for the sake of children's safety. During 2007, 59% of children in the welfare system experienced neglect, 10.8% were physically abused, 7.6% were sexually abused, 4.2% psychologically maltreated, and 4.2% experienced abandonment, threats of harm to the child, and/or congenital drug addiction (Beckmann et al., 2010). Since children are dependent on their parents, the inability to afford basic resources, persistent stress, and dangerous environments can pose risks to healthy child development.

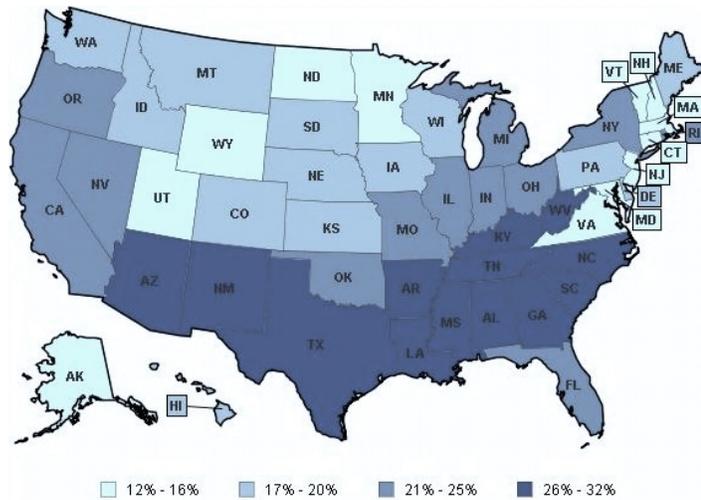
### **50 years of America's War on Poverty**

Next year, 2014 will mark the fiftieth anniversary of America's unofficial War on Poverty, when President Lyndon B. Johnson urged Congress and the American public to focus on reducing the racial and socioeconomic inequality that plagued America through the declaration of an unconditional War on Poverty. Convinced that the United States could not afford to lose this metaphorical war, Johnson proceeded to launch a vast social agenda known as the Great Society. Amongst others programs, this federal policy initiated the provision of food stamps to the poorest Americans, established Medicare and Medicaid through the Social Security Act of 1965, created the Head Start early childhood education program for disadvantaged preschoolers, and invested federal aid in higher education. Emphasizing the high returns yielded from investing early in children, he advocated for attention to better schools, healthcare, and job training.

In his 1964 State of the Union Address, Johnson warned:

Very often a lack of jobs and money is not the cause of poverty, but the symptom. The cause may lie deeper in our failure to give our fellow citizens a fair chance to develop their own capacities, in a lack of education and training, in a lack of medical care and housing, in a lack of decent communities in which to live and bring up their children.

Yet, half a century later many anti-poverty supports do not reach everyone who needs them. Subsidized housing reaches 2.34 million Americans serving only 9% of those eligible. SNAPs (formerly food stamps) helps 33.7 million people buy groceries, but only reaches 66% of those eligible. TANF (cash assistance to poor families) is accompanied by a work requirement and a 5-year limited term for one's lifetime reaching 4.03 million families, only 40% of those eligible (Shanks & Danzinger, 2011).



Children in poverty (Percent) - 2011

KIDS COUNT Data Center, [www.kidscount.org/datacenter](http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter)  
A Project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

The United States espouses ideals of equality, freedom and opportunity. Nevertheless, percentages of child poverty rates, low birth-weight births, infant mortality rates, child death rates, teen birth rates, teen death rates, high school dropout rates, and idle teens all have statistically significant differences between states indicating vast disparity in child well being (O'Hare, Mather, & Dupuis, 2012). Differences between state policies are expected in the United States, given its large size, federalist structure, and the diversity between regions. State governments yield enormous freedom in determining social policy determining two thirds of the total funds spent on children resulting in variance between states accomplished primarily through state management of eligibility and benefits criteria of federal programs (O'Hare et al., 2012).

In the 2008 election, candidate now President Barack Obama reiterated Johnson's notion of arming children in poverty with the skills and resources to overcome economic hardship. Criticizing the hyper-individualistic approach to social supports, Obama explained:

In Washington, they call this the "Ownership Society," but what it really means is that you're on your own. Out of work? Tough luck, you're on your own. No health care? The

market will fix it. You're on your own. Born into poverty? Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, even if you don't have boots. You are on your own. (Obama, 2008)

Crucially, impoverished children cannot lift themselves out of poverty without basic resources to develop their capacities to rise above their economic circumstance. Rather, living in poverty subjects children and their families to significant stresses, essentially submerging their potential through economic duress making upward economic mobility difficult.

### **American exceptionalism toward family policies**

While American politicians invoke family values, the rhetoric often does not follow through to enacting policies for families. *Family* and *family oriented* words are considered a 'sure fire vote winning strategy' for American politicians appearing over 218 times in an average week over a 10-year period in Congressional records, used in 1/3 of all speeches, statements, tributes, and images. (Bogenschneider, 2011). However, this discussion of families rarely translates into family directed policies. In the 2012 session, state lawmakers introduced more than 800 bills in 46 states in the 2012 that addressed issues relating to young children, but only 92 passed into law (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2012).

In fact, the United States is a notable outlier when it comes to many family policies that seem commonplace for most other Western nations. One example is that paid parental leave policies have been linked to advantageous child and maternal health outcomes and utilized by 163 nations around the world, but the United States protects 12 weeks of unpaid leave for about half of mothers in America, while the remainder receive no maternal leave benefits (Widener, 2007).

For many, skepticism about family social interventions is rooted in a fear of creating a dependency on welfare. Neoliberal theorists who heavily influenced the welfare system in the United States such as Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman argued that "coercive redistribution of the welfare state set the democratic polity on the slippery slope towards totalitarianism, cultures of welfare dependency, and the demise of self – reliance and individual responsibility" (Hemerijk, 2012, p. 41). Additionally, arguments against vast public spending and public deficits in neoliberal states are made "in the name of future generations whose well being should not be mortgaged" (Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012, p. 9).

Discussions over family policies in the United States are littered with controversy from multiple angles. Religious and moral arguments advocate helping struggling poor children, although historical notions of reliance on private charities rather than governmental supports as well as the

concept of the Protestant work ethic also arise. Economic arguments supporting child benefits cite social investment, early returns, and the importance of activating policies, whereas those opposing claim that vast government spending on social supports does not help future generations, but rather chains them to further debt (Morel et al., 2012). Politically, discussions question the role of the government in relation to the privacy and autonomy of families, often alluding to a fear of treading remotely near 'socialist policies' that for most Americans still connote images from the Cold War, pitting democracy and freedom against communism and governmental control. Perhaps somewhat encouraging America's outlier status is the national notion of American Exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup>

The term "American Exceptionalism," is said to have been coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in 1831, has historically referred to the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, and distinctive political and religious institutions... The phrase sometimes also connotes the notion that America's canonical commitments to liberty, equality, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire somehow exempt it from the historical forces that have led to the corruption of other societies. In American political life, the concept flows through the rhetoric of nearly every American President, from Washington's Farewell Speech, to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, to Reagan's image of a shining city on the hill, to nearly every post-September II speech of George W. Bush. (Koh, 2003, p.1481)

Taught in many middle school textbooks, the idea was used to justify the Manifest Destiny in the 1840s – the American expansion into Native American lands that were deemed barbaric in order to spread her virtuous ideals of freedom and liberty. Originally written as a critique of Americans, the idea has been transformed into a national myth of cultural superiority. The concept of American Exceptionalism can be used to explain why the United States never adopted many social policies.

In the influential and controversial works *American Exceptionalism: A Double Edged Sword* by Seymour Martin Lipset, (1996) and *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* by Lipset & Gary Marks (2000) authors discuss how "Americanism, however, is an "ism" or ideology in the same way that communism or fascism or liberalism are *isms*. The American ideology, stemming from the American Revolution, can be subsumed in five words: antistatism, laissez-faire, individualism, populism, and egalitarianism" (Lipset & Marks, 1996, p. 1). Using American

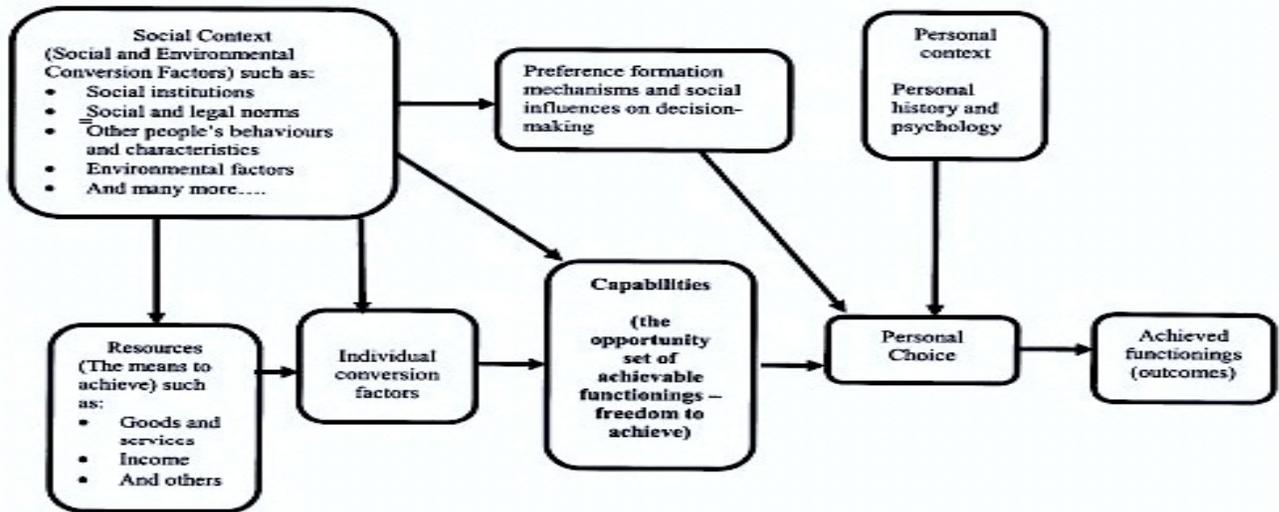
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<sup>1</sup> See also: Ceasar, James W. The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism. *American Political Thought*.

Exceptionalism to explain why the United States never adopted socialist policies found in many European welfare states has concerned prominent social theorists for decades from Friedrich Engels, Trotsky, Lenin, Werner Sombart, and H.G. Wells (Lipset & Marks, 1996).

**The capability approach**

Throughout the 1980s, Amartya Sen pioneered the capability approach as an alternative way of understanding welfare economics, later winning the Nobel Prize in economic sciences and participating in the creation of United Nations Human Development Index (Clark, 2005; Harvard biographical note, 2013; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1985). Drawing on philosophical roots of Aristotle, Marx, and the commonly known Basic Needs Index, Sen highlighted the relationship of commodities to human flourishing (Clark, 2005; Sen, 1985).



**Figure 1 Visual representation of a person’s capabilities and social and personal context (Robeyns, 2005:98)**

Playing a large role in the capability approach is the social context of a population due to how sociopolitical factors influence what resources are available, how social preferences are determined, as well as what capabilities or opportunities exist. While the capability approach touches on many important and interrelated social processes, the essential relationship demonstrated is the importance of the availability of commodities (resources shaped by the social context) to the development of capabilities and the resulting desired functioning (Clark, 2005, Robeyns 2005; Sen, 1985).

A simple analogy of the capability approach is one of a child with high intelligence who may be unable to foster and develop their skills fully if they only have access to a poor education system.

In this example, the availability and quality of the commodity/resource of education can drastically affect the development of capabilities and later outcomes. When determining how to improve supports for raising children in poverty, providing resources for parents and young children is essential to cultivating capabilities that can lead to better outcomes later in life.

### **Using capability approach to reduce stresses of raising children in poverty through parenting support programs**

Most Americans live with a moderate level of stress (APA, 2010). The family stress model illustrates how stresses from economic hardship can result in negative outcomes for children (Conger, 2005). Costs of child rearing such as healthy food, school clothes, toys, books, activities, etc. weigh on many parents. These common costs of parenting weigh even more as parents living in poverty struggle to meet the numerous challenges and demands of family life, working long hours for low wages to shoulder the additional economic burden of children on top of those of regular life.

As demonstrated through the family stress model, low-income parents face heavy pressures and anxieties due to economic hardship as well as having fewer coping resources (such as reliable transportation, childcare services, or health insurance), which can result in harsher parenting behavior (Conger, 2005). On average, lower income parents are less educated, less sensitive in responses toward their children, offer less emotional support, use less extensive vocabularies, read less, and engage less discourse in with their children (Kalthoff, 2010). Thus, easing the stresses of poor parents by equipping them with the knowledge, resources, and skills (“capabilities” in Sen’s capability approach) to handle the difficulties of parenthood and poverty can help to provide a safe and nurturing family environments more likely to foster positive development.

By empowering parents with information, strategies, and skills, parental support programs have been linked to a variety of positive outcomes for children from school readiness competencies, social-emotional development and preventing behavioral problems, to preventing child abuse and neglect (Beckmann et al., 2010). Many parenting support programs vary in their target groups, theoretical frameworks, and recommended strategies. Some focus heavily on what to expect from children at different developmental stages, others promote parent-child interaction, and some promote positive discipline techniques (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Perhaps the most widely used parenting program is the Australian Triple-P positive parenting program, now in use in 25 different countries. Triple-P emphasizes self-regulation through encouraging parents to use self-efficacy, self-management tools, and personal agency when problem

solving, and continuing to use the skills after the intervention (Sanders, 2008). This once again relates to both the family stress model and Sen's capability approach: by arming stressed parents with resources (self regulation skills), they develop their own capabilities to reach desired functioning (Sanders, 2008; Sen, 1985). Parenting support programs embrace Sen's capabilities approach by providing the resources and means to achieve for parents to foster happier home environments and ultimately higher child well being. Given the implications for children growing up in home environments with high levels of toxic stress illustrated through the family stress model, improving access to parenting support programs can serve to educate parents about behaviors that can promote healthy child development.

### **Smart Practices from Abroad: Child well being in the Netherlands**

Various child well being surveys confirm that most Dutch children and families are 'doing well.' The Netherlands exhibits strong family and child outcomes when compared to the average of OECD nations - higher employment rates, parental education rates, and fertility rates as well as low levels of youth unemployment, high reading literacy levels, below average levels of child income poverty, and high levels of life satisfaction in childhood (OECD Doing Better Netherlands Country Profile, 2013).

The most recent Unicef *Innocenti* report, "Child well being in rich nations: A comparative overview," ranks the Netherlands as having the highest overall child well being across five dimensions (2013). Yet, this recent success in the overview came as little surprise for many given the recent Dutch child well being measures. Below are some of the largest recent studies that all seem to distinguish particular success in the Netherlands.

- **2001-2002:** Netherlands led child well being tables in Unicef data (Unicef, 2013)
- **2007:** Unicef *Innocenti* Report ranks the Netherlands as having the highest average score. Also, Dutch children ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in self-reported satisfaction. (Unicef, 2007)
- **2008:** The British Child Poverty Action Group found the Netherlands to have the highest average score of child well being among 29 European nations (CPAG, 2008).
- **2010:** The World Health Organization compared data from 11, 13, and 15 year olds from 39 different nations finding Dutch children self-reported the highest life satisfaction based on a ladder from 1 to 10. (HSBC, 2010)
- **2010:** In comparison to children and teens from other nations, Dutch children have among the lowest rates of obesity, diet less, eat breakfast more often, drink less

alcohol, smoke less tobacco and cannabis, and have less unsafe sex than most of the other nations (Currie, Zanotti, Morgan, Currie, de Looze, Roberts, Samdal, Smith & Barnekow, 2012).

Dutch child well being rankings set an enviable example for other advanced industrialized nations struggling with tackling child poverty. New Zealand is one among several who seek to learn from the Netherlands. The Every Child Counts organization commissioned ‘The Netherlands Study’ in order to investigate Dutch public policies and programs that could serve as an example for policy reform in their own nation (Row Davies Research (RDR), 2012). Particularly impressed by the OECD reports on spending and child well being, the study emphasizes “that the Netherlands achieves beneficial outcomes for children comparable to the highest spending countries in the OECD, such as Denmark, while spending less than half the amount per child.” (RDR 2012, p. 7).

The Every Child Counts organization used a collection of Dutch policies regarding parent support and education, early childhood education access and availability, housing availability, poverty reduction strategies through labor market and income support, youth policy, reducing vulnerability through systematic approaches and targeted programs, and children’s rights and youth participation (RDR, 2012). The Dutch smart practices in these policy areas serve as a basis for recommendations for eradicating child poverty in New Zealand. Whether the Dutch approach to supporting families and promoting child well being can be extrapolated to an American context, particularly to tackle the social problem of child poverty, depends heavily on social contexts regarding parenting and childhood in each nation. Thus, this research project investigates the following question:

**What sociopolitical commonalities encourage the adoption of Dutch inspired Youth and Family Centers in the United States to reduce the stresses of raising children in poverty?**

### **Research design**

Incorporating Sen’s capability approach, this research project compares the social context of parenting as well as resources that support parenting and early childhood in the United States and the Netherlands. The Netherlands is used as a model for assessing supports for children and parents primarily because of repeated successes in child well being surveys and recent political attention towards supporting parents. Additionally, despite the Great Recession, the Netherlands initiated significant policy attention and public funds towards supporting the role of parents in promoting child well being from the 2007 to 2010. This is seen not only in the former Youth and Family

Ministry, but also in the Every Opportunity for Every Child policy proposal that established Youth and Family Centers in all Dutch municipalities. The Youth and Family Centers embrace both Sen's capability approach – through providing parenting education and parenting support programs that teach skills and knowledge about child rearing; and also the family stress model by offering a centralized location for supports that aim to ease burdens or stresses on parents.

Because these Youth and Family Centers incorporate both Sen's capability approach as well as the family stress model, they may have beneficial repercussions in the United States – particularly for parents raising children in poverty. However in order to reconcile American hesitations towards family policies, common sociopolitical factors regarding parenting and children can be used to justify how this form of parenting support in use in the Netherlands may be applicable in an American context. In order to do this, I will address sociopolitical issues regarding parenting and early childhood in each nation. Then, what features of the Dutch implementation of Youth and Family Centers may be reconcilable with the American context of parents raising children in poverty. With the family stress model and Sen's capability approach as guiding theoretical frameworks, assessing the sociopolitical context of Youth and Family Centers in the Netherlands can ultimately serve as a smart practices analysis for translating family supports from abroad into the United States.

This research is a qualitative cross-national sociopolitical analysis that aims to identify smart practices in parenting and child policy in the Netherlands that can ultimately be used to reduce stresses on parents raising children in poverty in the United States. Contextual commonalities and differences towards parenting and children are evidenced by data from national responses to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC), academic research on cultural ethnotheories of parenting, and national policies, institutions, and programs of parenting support.

The UN CRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty to ever exist; yet, the United States is the only nation (other than Somalia) to refuse its adoption. Examination into what kept the United States from adopting the UN CRC is thus relevant to discussion of sociopolitical attitudes towards children as well as parents. Comparing the American skepticism regarding the UN CRC with the Dutch implementation illustrates two different approaches towards children. Comparing cultural attitudes about parenting and childhood provides further perspective into the social context surrounding families. Given the relationship between social context and resources addressed in the capability approach, cultural commonalities between American and Dutch perspectives can help to establish the adoption of smart practices from Dutch parenting support to ease stresses on parents raising children in poverty in the United States. Finally, discussion of how parenting support is

incorporated into Dutch policies, institutions, and programs illustrates resources that can help parents develop their capabilities ultimately achieving desirable outcomes.

### **National Responses to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child**

Discussion of child poverty or child well being in the United States must address the nation's refusal to ratify the UN CRC in the 1990s. The United States prides itself as a leader in promoting human rights globally, yet would not ratify the UN CRC intended to guarantee civil, cultural, economic, political, and social rights to children. Although the United States had a significant role in drafting the Convention, President Reagan's delegates "essentially stated that the United States would never ratify the Convention but was participating in the drafting process so that these other countries would have a better treaty" (Cohen, 2006, p. 188).<sup>2</sup> The United States proposed more articles than any other nation ranging from family reunification, freedom of religion, the right to privacy, protection from abuse, review of placement, freedom of speech, and freedom of association and assembly (Cohen, 2006, p. 191).

Reviving anti-statist virtues of Americanism previously mentioned, many opposed to ratifying the UN CRC claimed that its ratification would give up national sovereignty to the United Nations and essentially override parental rights towards their children (Scherrer, 2012). Since ratification requires member states to submit progress reports on implementation, critics also feared that the United States could be held at the mercy of a foreign tribunal with the potential to be biased against the United States. Rumors over the implications of ratification of the UN CRC flew wildly, snowballing into ideas never mentioned in the UN CRC. As such, "groups succeeded in framing the UN CRC as an assault on United States culture by the United Nations by contending that it advocated loss of parental control over their children, abortion, homosexual behavior, Satanism, gang involvement, and control of US families being placed in the hands of small and sometimes hostile countries"(Scherrer, 2012, p. 17). Amidst fears that a supranational government was trying to take away parental rights such as to homeschool their children, spank their children, and require their children to attend church, the UN CRC remains yet to be ratified.

The refusal of the United States to ratify the UN CRC makes comparisons with different nations difficult. They do not share a clear common declaration of goals, as is the case with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for example, an international human rights treaty the United States has ratified. Essentially, the United States refusal to ratify the UN CRC declares that it does

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Price Cohen participated in the drafting of the UN CRC

not agree with the goals and guidelines for children accepted by all other nations. This presents an obstacle in cross-national and international comparisons with efforts and policies towards children, since those who have ratified the UN CRC presumably aim towards its implementation, whereas the United States emphatically does not. However, the active participation in the drafting process shows that the United States does hold many of the values and goals expressed in the Convention, but could not ratify it in entirety due to the political sensitivity towards parental rights and family autonomy.

Conversely, the Netherlands ratified the UN CRC in 1995 aiming to guarantee children's rights and promote children's well being. High child well-being and self reported life satisfaction of children in the Netherlands suggest that the Dutch practices of implementation warrant examination for smart practices that may be effective in other nations. In accordance with the UN CRC, the Netherlands fulfills a feedback loop with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years providing reports on implementation, reservations, and concerns of the UN and children's rights groups (UN Concluding Observations, 1999; Netherlands State Party Report, 2003; UN Concluding Observations, 2004; State Party Report, 2007). This feedback loop illustrates some of the following provisions for parents and families.

In order to ensure parents have the resources and time to raise their children, the Netherlands implemented the Working Hours Adjustment Act (*Wet Aanpassing Arbeidsduur*) to allow parents to make structural adjustments to their working hours to help combine work and care. Likewise, the Basic Childcare Provision Act (*Wet Basisvoorziening Kinderopvang*) increased organized childcare, the structure of childcare provision, and the quality of supervision of childcare services. In 2004, the Better Protected (*Beter Beschermd*) policy required parenting plans to be created in instances of divorce to divide and share responsibilities in the best interests of the child. In 2007, the Netherlands officially banned parental violence against children including corporal punishment and psychological abuse. The same year, a policy plan was implemented dedicated to easing the responsibilities on parents and enabling the natural capacities of children. According to the Dutch government's website, the main points of the 54 articles in the UN CRC can be divided and grouped into following categories:

- **Provision:** Good and free education, good and accessible healthcare and other forms of care
- **Protection:** Freedom from ill treatment, exploitation, neglect, child labor, acts of war, child trafficking and slavery

- **Participation:** Children should be given the opportunity to participate in everything related to their lives including freedom of expression and an opportunity to make their views known and take part in the decision making about matters that may have a bearing on them

Debate has been raised, particularly from the United States, claiming that the UN CRC infringes upon inherent rights parents have of raising their children. While the primary concern of the UN CRC is the best interests of children, it recognizes the dependence children have on parents and the responsibility of parents in the preamble. The issue of parental rights and duties is addressed again in the eighteenth article about parental responsibility, reinforcing the important place parents and supporting parents have. Embracing the important role parents play in early development, many policies, programs, and services in the Netherlands are not only child-directed but also parent-directed and/or family-directed.

### **Sociopolitical attitudes towards parenting and childhood**

American tradition holds that the family is private and autonomous. Legal decisions are guided by cultural assumptions that (1) privacy strengthens families and (2) that parents will act in the best interests of their children (McMullen, 1992). Historically, the development of family autonomy and privacy “presumes that any contacts initiated by the public sphere will be potentially damaging. [So] ‘Family autonomy’ and ‘privacy’ imply a policy of state non-intervention” (McMullen, 1992, p. 589). This is also reflected in the hesitation and skepticism regarding the UN CRC. For some, supervision and laws coming from a supranational organization such as the United Nations violate American conceptions of privacy, family autonomy, and anti-statism associated with American exceptionalism. Unfortunately, the assumption that parents will act in the best interests of the child is not always enough. Inevitably, while some parents may act in what they perceive to be the best interests of their children “depending on their knowledge, experience, social supports, and environment, parents may not be able to accurately assess the best interests of their child” (McMullen, 1992, p. 596). The goal of parenting support programs is to intervene in situations where parents may not know what is best for children and enable them to achieve better family and child outcomes.

The *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Sociology* addresses the shifting assumptions about parenting in United States from the Colonial Era into the modern twenty-first century. The assumptions and cultural constructs reiterate the stresses on American parents discussed earlier. Today, “anxiety is the hallmark of modern parenting” as parents “agonize

incessantly about their children's physical health, personality development, psychological well being, and academic performance. From birth, modern parenting is colored by apprehension" (Mintz, 2004). While anxiety and apprehension are not new phenomena among parenting, contemporary parents have changed over time. Cultural constructs of American parenting have shifted from the 17<sup>th</sup> century where children were thought of as 'adults in training' to the 19<sup>th</sup> century where character formation became more important. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century brought a scientific view of child rearing – stressing regularity and systemization, then mid-early 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on fulfilling emotional and psychological needs, through to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century where there is modern emphasis on children's intellectual and social development (Mintz, 2004). Nonetheless,

There can be no doubt that contemporary parenting is more stressful than it was in the early postwar era [WWII]. Today's parents are beset by severe time pressures and work-related stress, and fewer have supportive kin or neighbors to help out in a pinch. Their children are growing up in a violent, sex-saturated environment, where the allure of drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and consumer products is widespread. Many of the vacant lots and other 'free' spaces where earlier generations were able to play without adult supervision have disappeared. The result has been a hovering, emotionally intense style of parenting and a more highly organization form of child rearing, which may have made it more difficult for children to forge an independent existence and assert their growing maturity and competence. (Mintz, 2004)

The Netherlands also has a long history of tradition of nuclear private families through the 1960s, from a culture "characterized by domesticity, by the ideal of do-it yourself mothering, by distance from the extended family, and even more so in general from the outside world" (Van Daalen, 2010, p. 353). Yet, the widespread feminist movement in the 1970s altered familial arrangements with more women entering the labor force. Although women were encouraged to work towards economic independence, the "strengthening of the nuclear family as an autonomous stronghold within the welfare state arrangements is apparent in several regulations and facilities" such as child allowances, maternal employment rate, and informal childcare arrangements with extended family members (Van Daalen, 2010, p. 353). The Netherlands also has a history of non-intervention in family affairs, with original child protection regulations only meant for children posing risks to social order. While "neglect and abuse without being a nuisance for people outside the family, without being delinquent, were regarded as a family issue and governmental intervention

was regarded as unwanted,” in the 1960s and 1970s child protection arrangements expanded in order to ensure protection and safety of children (Van Daalen, 2010, p. 354).

Recent studies on parental ethnotheories offer insight into cultural differences between parenting styles and how parents think of their children and their learning environment. Dutch parental ethnotheories are encoded in the common three R's of Dutch child rearing – rest (*rust*) regularity (*regelmaat*), and cleanliness (*reinheid*) (Harkness et al., 2010). Cultural research reflects that these ideas help to guide how parents organize their child's lives from day to day, and more broadly, what strategies parents use to teach their children to grow into successful members of society (Harkness et al., 2010). Researchers found that American parents tended to “overwhelmingly mention stimulation,” feeling stimulating toys need to be “incorporated into the baby's daily setting.” (Harkness et al., 2010, p. 69). American mothers also “had strong direction from professional, ‘expert’ sources of advice about the importance of stimulation” (p. 70). Dutch parents however, were “unique in their emphasis on the importance of rest and regularity of routines as a necessary foundation for all development,” in accordance with the three R's of Dutch parenting. Interestingly, “in contrast to their concern with baby's healthy development...Dutch mothers had relatively low expectations for stimulating early cognitive development, instead emphasizing the importance of maintaining a calm, positive state of arousal in the baby” (Harkness et al., 2010, p.71 - 72).

Harkness et al. also studied the words parents use to describe their children and cultural specific patterns. American parents' focus on attention to cognitive abilities is typical – “the highest frequency American descriptors included “intelligent” and “cognitively advanced” as well as “asks questions” (p. 75). Along with these qualities, American parents were also more likely than others to describe their children as “independent” and even “rebellious.” Dutch parents however “focused more on their children's social qualities, describing them as “agreeable” and “enjoying life.” The attribution of having a “long attention span” is a high-frequency descriptor only for the Dutch parents, as is being “regular” - not surprisingly given these parents' concern with rest and regularity and its benefits (Harkness et al., 2010, p. 75).

In accordance with Sen's capability approach, sociopolitical contexts shape what resources are available, which then go on to affect the capabilities people are able to develop. While non-intervention of the state in family affairs is embedded in the American context, other factors suggest a yearning for ways to manage stresses, ensure healthy cognitive development often through stimulation, and a strong reliance on professional advice. Dutch parents, too, have a historical

notion of familial autonomy, but highly value the avoidance of stressors in agreement with the three R's of Dutch child rearing. The family stress model explains how being poor can increase the toxic stresses in a family environment, result in harsher parenting behaviors, and have long term consequences for children. Therefore, establishing parenting supports in the United States to help parents raising children in poverty needs to arm parents with the skills and capabilities to better cope with stresses. Given the data thus far, several factors stand out in order for parenting support to be successful in the United States.

### **Freedom of choice to respect familial autonomy**

While American parents respect expert and professional advice particularly regarding children's development, a distrust of governmental intervention necessitates providing choices of programs, perhaps with private market based options. Parenting support must respect familial privacy and autonomy to overcome this hesitation towards state intervention in families. Giving parents a freedom of choice regarding different supports is also important in respecting differing social or religious views about family as well as in reducing potential feelings of governmental encroachment in family life.

### **Emphasizing cognitive development**

American parents are known for focusing on cognitive development, with plenty of examples of helicopter parenting and overloading children with extracurricular skills in order to better compete in education and later in business. Ensuring proper cognitive development and intellect is commonly seen as the way to guarantee children's success later in life. For parents raising children in poverty, however, cognitive development can be hindered due to toxic stresses (Blair et al., 2011). Early childhood education is widely considered to have its origins in Johnson's Great Society initiative with the Head Start preschool program to reduce inequalities among disadvantaged children. Involving parents in early learning, and ensuring that at-risk children have access to early childhood programs, can help to promote cognitive development, school readiness, and social skills.

### **Reducing stress through increasing knowledge**

Although stress is a natural part of both childhood and adult life, consistent exposure to intense stress has been proven detrimental to development (AAP, 2012). The family stress model highlights how toxic stress in a household can affect children. In order to reduce stresses on parents raising children in poverty, arming them with skills and knowledge (capabilities in Sen's approach) can establish healthy coping behaviors. These can reduce

levels of stress in the home and be considered responsible parenting behavior rather than governmental intrusion. Because parents in poverty tend to have lower education levels, providing parenting education to poor parents can help to equip them with ways to handle children and the stresses that come along with childrearing. Basic knowledge regarding different foods, types of play and bonding exercises for different ages, as well as the effects that harsh parenting behaviors such as yelling or spanking can have on young children may be able to drastically alter home life for parents who were unaware of how their actions effect young children's development.

### **Supports for parenting and childhood in Dutch policies, institutions, and programs**

A brief analysis of the recent *Every Opportunity for Every Child* (EOEC) policy investigates how the Netherlands fosters such high child well being as well as incorporating the natural role of parents and the family. Despite the Great Recession, recent Dutch governments have placed parenting and family high on the social agenda. Spearheaded by André Rouvoet, a Program Minister for Youth and Family from the Christian Union political party, the EOEC policy plan was passed in 2007 (Anthonijsz & Berg- le Clercq, 2013; EOEC, 2007). With notable similarity to the British *Every Child Matters Agenda*, the Dutch government aims to achieve five goals for all children in the Netherlands: (1) healthy upbringing, (2) safe upbringing, (3) contributing to society, (4) developing talents and having fun, and (5) being properly prepared for the future (Boddy et al., 2009). In order to accomplish these, the proposal consisted of three main strategies to assist parents and children in the Netherlands (EOEC, 2007).

#### **Growing up is something you do in a family**

The first strategy intends to confirm the family's natural role in bringing up children. The EOEC policy states one of its key aims to "exploit the inherent strength of families, wider family networks, and local communities" (EOEC, 2007, p. 11). This reflects evidence of the "strengthening of nuclear family as autonomous stronghold" within the Dutch welfare state arrangements, and the belief that Dutch families heavily support free choice regarding how to raise and educate children (Knijn and Oorschoot, 2008; Van Daalen, 2010, p. 353). Specific features of this first strategy include the provision of child allowances for families, protection for families with children facing foreclosure, the accessibility of local sports organizations, and the establishment of

Youth and Family (YAF) Centers in every municipality (Anthonijsz & Berg- le Clerq, 2013; EOEC, 2007).

### **Focus on Prevention**

The second strategy emphasizes the importance of identifying and tackling problems earlier. This strategy is concerned with the increasing need for specialist youth care services, such as special education, mental health care, learning difficulties, as well as juvenile delinquency (EOEC, 2007). The second strategy aims to intervene in problematic situations earlier, hoping to prevent serious and/or dangerous situations. In order to achieve this, a growth and development risk assessment for each child from birth through age four is conducted at well-baby clinics at the YAF Centers, with specialist help or interventions recommended when needed (EOEC, 2007).

### **Binding commitments**

The final strategy reassures the Dutch government's pledge to ensure that a permissive noncommittal approach would not allow undesirable situations to continue. This section lines out the various responsibilities of primary actors – government, child and youth professionals, and parents as listed in the *Every Opportunity for Every Child* brief (EOEC, 2007).

- The governmental responsibilities lie with the individual municipalities, which are considered "guardians of the conditions for children's development." Municipalities are responsible for running the YAF centers, identifying and reporting child abuse or neglect, creating a child friendly environment, and promoting the citizenship of young people (EOEC, 2007, p. 15). Creating a child friendly environment encourages municipalities to compete in the creation and or maintenance of safe footpaths, a clean and secure outdoor environment, local availability of activities and sports, preventing eviction of families with children, and at least 3% of residential land set aside for playgrounds and recreation (EOEC, 2007, p. 25).
- Child and Youth Professionals also have responsibilities under the plan. A *one family, one plan* model is used, merging various types of help in an effort to consolidate and centralize help and supports for families. Additionally, care is given in the most effective location - school, home, YAF, etc. Professionals such as daycare workers, teachers, doctors, and others, also have a reporting duty for cases of abuse or

neglect in order to prevent harmful situations from occurring and/or repeating (EOEC, 2007).

- Within the *EOEC*, parents are primarily responsible for raising their own children. The goal is to provide help if needed, but also to provide intervention if the safety, health, or development of the child is at risk. The importance of creating and maintaining a good work-family life balance is considered vital to ensuring that parents have the time and energy to devote to child rearing (EOEC, 2007).

### **Discussion of Youth and Family Centers**

Many consider the Netherlands to be a child-centered society having a long history towards valuing children. Professor of Psychology at the University of Groningen, Dr. Gerrit Breeusma responded to high child well being rankings in the Netherlands stating, “You could almost say that we Dutch invented the child-centered society; children have always played a very important role and even more so because family relationships are more liberal and communicative than ever before here.” (Conway, 2007). Although there are many various youth care organizations operating in the Netherlands, the recent establishment of YAF Centers aims to promote child wellbeing by incorporating the natural role of the family, particularly in parenting (EOEC, 2007). For this reason, similar interventions may be possible in the United States to address toxic stress in impoverished families. The YAF Centers aim to provide parents and families with a one-stop shop with local access to quality advice about child rearing and services related to raising a family (Boddy et al., 2009; EOEC, 2007). The availability of professional advice and supportive services can be considered resources in Sen’s capability approach, resulting in greater parental capabilities. Increased capabilities such as knowledge and healthy coping mechanisms can then be used to reduce stresses on parents, which the family stress model predicts will result ultimately happier and healthier children.

American hesitation toward social policy implementation, particularly for children, often stems from a fear of governmental encroachment on family and parental rights. The YAF Centers’ mission is to ensure the natural role of the family and to provide access to knowledge and supports for parents. Thus, investigating how the YAF Centers incorporate familial autonomy and privacy as well as respecting differing perspectives is essential to determining the feasibility of adopting similar parenting support programs for impoverished families in the United States.

**Decentralization, local modifications, and federalism**

A key factor in the YAF Centers is decentralization and the importance of local context. As a result, there is no national standard for the Centers, outside of a basic model of (1) parenting supports, (2) child and youth healthcare, (3) links to youth care options, and (4) links to school care and advice teams. (Boddy et al., 2009). Local modifications for the family centers are encouraged, depending on what each area needs, such as incorporating the following services (EOEC, 2007):

- Child day care, play-groups, early childhood education
- School attendance officers
- Community schools
- Children and youth work and welfare organizations: health services such as GPs or midwives, employment offices, support for debt relief, police and probation services

The emphasis on encouraging decentralization and local modifications for regional differences in the Netherlands is particularly important in considering the adoption of similar programs in the United States. Given the federalist structure of the individual states, as well as extreme regional differences in political views, religious beliefs, and social contexts, any implementation of parenting support in the United States needs to incorporate decentralization to state or county levels as well as allowing for local modifications. Just as the Netherlands recognizes that children and families living in Amsterdam have differing needs compared to those living in rural areas such as Nuenen or Hinderloopen; families living in New York or Los Angeles understandably face different issues than those in Iowa, Texas, or South Dakota. These differing contexts for families necessitate different resources targeted for their needs.

**Prenatal, postnatal, and infant care**

Parental care in the prenatal, postnatal, and infant years sets the foundation for children's development. Recognizing that these critical early years can have lifelong effects, incorporating supports for expecting and new parents is vital to fostering healthy development. As such, financial support for prenatal education in the Netherlands was included in the grant for YAF Centers in 2009. The Public Health Act in 2012 also required all municipalities to offer universal prenatal education (Anthonijsz & Berg- le Clerq, 2013).

Early postnatal care (*kraamzorg*) delivered by trained maternity nurses has been considered a right for Dutch women for several decades (Boddy et al., 2009). These maternity nurses typically assist the midwife if there is a home delivery, care for the new mother and newborn baby, provide

infant health education to the family, perform household services, and recognize deviations from normalcy in either the new mother or baby to alert the midwife (Boddy et al., 2009). Additional services can include breastfeeding support, advising in care such as bathing, caring for older children, preparing meals, and even laundry. All women are legally entitled to at least three hours a day of postnatal care, although the number of hours could increase up to a potential eighty hours a week if circumstances warrant more help; for instance in families with many children, mental illness, an unstable family situation, twins, or difficulty breastfeeding (Hosking & Walsh, 2010). While the postnatal care does not take place at YAF Centers, information about receiving it is available and incorporated in the prenatal care and education requirement.

Youth and Family Centers also provide access to a local health clinic that provides children with health and developmental checks from birth until school admittance at age 4. At these well-baby clinics (*consultatiebureau*), the second strategy of EOEC comes into play, with a focus on identifying risk factors and problems early on. Well baby clinics are extremely popular and utilized, with roughly 97% of new mothers utilizing the services in the first year (Boddy et al., 2009). Establishing well baby clinics in YAF Centers helps to create a central location for parents to access not only healthcare, but also supportive care through the variety of services and supports available to parents in the Netherlands.

The high rate of unintended pregnancies in the United States, particularly among those living below the federal poverty limit, increases the chances of inadequate prenatal care. Stresses on expecting parents from economic hardship result in adverse pregnancy outcomes and also have consequences later in life, demonstrated in the family stress model (Braveman et al., 2008; Conger, 2005). Thus, establishing a resource that emphasizes and encourages prenatal, postnatal, and infant care for expecting parents serves not only to help inform them of what to expect with the arrival of their child, but also helps to foster healthy development in the critical foundational stages. This type of support also embodies the capability approach – by increasing the availability and quality of resources for stressed parents, they can increase their capabilities and skills then used to achieve happy and healthy children. Thus, guaranteeing that expecting parents in poverty have access to information at a convenient centralized location that with programs that promote healthy behaviors, equips them with capabilities to reduce stresses that may inhibit healthy child development.

### **Links to parental involvement in early learning, early childhood education, and cognitive development**

YAF Centers are required to provide links to both care services and education services and advice. Incorporating early childhood education and care services as an important element of family support reflects the societal importance of developing social skills as well as cognitive development. With traces of a domestic mothering mentality still in Dutch culture, most mothers only work part time. This plays a role in the shaping of early childhood education policy in the Netherlands (Driessen, 2004). Roughly 71% percent of Dutch mothers with a child under six and 66% of mothers with children under three years old work at least part time (OECD, 2006).

The idea of free choice on how to raise and educate children is important in the Netherlands. The majority of population can be considered rather progressive in its opinion of childcare, working mothers, and equality among sexes (Knijn & Oorschot, 2008). While Dutch mothers agreed with so-called individualistic attitudes on women's autonomy, most Dutch mothers also "strongly preferred accommodating their children's needs themselves, assuming that it is in the best interest of the children to be cared for at home, in their own environment, preferably by one of their parents (Knijn & Oorschot, 2008, p.1528). Domestic mothering attitudes such as these are encouraged through social supports that help to allow parents more time at home reflecting a respect for familial autonomy and the important place of parents.

Incorporating social contexts of domestic mothering attitudes and family autonomy with the availability of freedom of choice regarding childcare arrangements is also suitable for the American context of parenting. With many traditional family values evident in politics, society, and family relations, guaranteeing that choices of supports and options are respectful of so-called domestic mothering attitudes and family autonomy is essential to the implementation of family supports in the United States. Harkness et al. illustrates the importance and value American parents tend to place on expert and professional opinions, yet overcoming anti-statist sentiments regarding big government and intrusion into how parents raise their children is more likely with the availability of freedom of choice with different options.

Most children in the Netherlands visit early childhood education and care services twice a week for two to three hours either to play or to participate in intervention delivered by independent, private organizations (Driessen, 2003). A large-scale longitudinal study of the utilization and effects of early childhood education and care programs in the Netherlands differentiates between daycare centers, preschools/preschool playgroups, and early childhood education programs or parent-child

programs that are considered “special services aimed at particular categories of parents and children mostly from disadvantaged social economic and/or ethnic-cultural backgrounds” (Driessen, 2003, p. 669). A key element of Dutch early childhood education and care policy is the involvement of parents in early learning for children. The Dutch Bernard van Leer Foundation and the International Child Development Initiatives Leiden (ICDI) identify four goals or motives in the Dutch context for parental involvement in early learning

- (1) Pedagogical: the harmonization of child rearing and education at home and at school,
- (2) Organizational: parents providing practical help,
- (3) Democratic: giving parents a voice in decision-making practices,
- (4) Enablement: enhancing the quality of mutual relationships between parents and practitioners (ICDI, 2012, p.45).

Furthermore, the 2005 Childcare Law (*Wet Kinderopvang*) requires all childcare organizations to have a parent’s representative council (*oudercommissies*) (ICDI, 2012). This comes from the perspective that “a strong parent community is viewed as a means to support not only the upbringing and education of children, but also social cohesion” (ICDI, 2012, p. 22). These parent groups, like the American Parent Teacher Associations help to encourage parental involvement. These parent councils have the right to advise early childhood education and care organizations on issues such as quality of care, opening times, and prices; parent councils must also agree with the organizations’ number of members, how they are chosen, and length of time they sit on the group.

There are also efforts to consolidate complaints and make the information of prices and quality of all daycare services available to parents online (ICDI, 2012). After assessing case studies of parental involvement in early learning, four lessons of good practice in stand out among Dutch programs. These include (1) providing a continuum or joined-up services for young children and their families, (2) political commitment and a long-term vision, (3) engaging fathers as well as mothers in supporting their children’s learning, (4) supporting parents, practitioners, and children as active learners (ICDI, 2012, 45).

The Dutch preference for freedom of choice regarding childrearing and the respect for local preferences encourages offering a variety of early childhood interventions delivered by independent, private organizations. This is also consistent with the American neoliberal context of privatization and market based options. Not only does the availability of independent, private care services allow parents to determine what programs best fit their family’s needs, but it also offers the opportunity to create business and growth in the early childhood sector. Research suggests that the stresses that a

child experiences living in poverty like crowded conditions, financial worries, and inadequate child care, can lead to an impairment of learning ability in children (Blair et al, 2011; Welsh et al, 2010). American parents show high concern for fostering and stimulating cognitive development; thus securing early childhood education services for children most at risk of falling behind promotes national ideals of equality, opportunity, and also helping in the reduction of school readiness gaps.

Suggesting an increase in federal attention to early childhood, President Obama issued the following plan to ensure early education for all Americans in February 2013. The new initiative aims to achieve the following measures (White House, 2013).

- (1) Establish a cost-sharing partnership with all 50 states to extend federal funds to expand high quality public preschool to reach all low and moderate-income four year olds from families at or below 200% poverty.
- (2) Expand the availability of full day kindergarten since only 6 in 10 children currently have access.
- (3) Invest in the federal Head Start program so it can grow to serve greater share of infants, toddlers, and three year olds while state preschool settings will serve four year olds.
- (4) Establish a new Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership program.
- (5) Expand the Administration's evidence based home visiting initiative.

Additionally, Hillary Clinton's first project after retiring as Secretary of State in 2013 was 'Too Small to Fail,' an initiative for children aged zero to five. The organization aims to "promote new research on the science of children's brain development, early learning and early health, and ... help parents, businesses and communities identify specific actions, consistent with the new research, that they can take to improve the lives of young children" (Too Small to Fail, 2013). However, as with Obama's ECEC proposal, whether any programs can be successfully implemented remains to be seen given the political sensitivity of family policies. This is enhanced by those who view government's involvement in child rearing is "as trespassing into the private lives of citizens," incorporating parental involvement in early childhood learning can serve to safeguard against fears of governmental intrusion or indoctrination (Kameran & Gatenio-Gabel, 2007).

Nevertheless, as new initiatives form, and researchers and policymakers confer on what policies, practices, and programs to fund, smart practices from nations like the Netherlands that perform highly in child development ought to be considered for mitigating the effects of child poverty.

### Conclusion

Despite being the richest nation in the world, nearly a quarter of children in the United States are growing up in a state of poverty (Unicef, 2013). These children are likely to experience long-term side effects from early exposure to adversity and toxic stress illustrated in the family stress model; yet these effects can be reduced with targeted social interventions to help parents raising children in poverty (AAP, 2013; Conger, 2005). Given the importance of the early foundational years on childhood development, ensuring that parents raising children in poverty are well equipped with ‘capabilities’ like knowledge regarding child development, coping skills for stressful situations, and support services can disrupt the cyclical nature of poverty. Incorporating Sen’s capability approach, guaranteeing adequate resources like these serves to improve the capabilities of individuals to reach desired outcomes, such as healthy child development regardless of being born into poverty. Thus, ensuring that parents have access to knowledge regarding child rearing can improve their abilities to exhibit healthy parenting behaviors.

However, adopting social interventions, particularly relating to families, is politically sensitive in the United States (Bogenschneider, 2011). With a strong non-interventionist approach to families in order to respect familial autonomy and privacy, any parenting support measures must respect the natural role of the family. Given the previously discussed risks associated with being born into poverty, increasing resources for prenatal development and knowledge regarding early infant care can increase the capabilities and likelihood of healthy behaviors by impoverished parents (Braveman et al, 2008; Finer & Zolna, 2011). Additionally, encouraging parental involvement in early learning such as early childhood education programs can help to promote cognitive development among children who may be at higher risk of falling behind in school (Welsh et al, 2010). Consequently, Dutch inspired Youth and Family Centers may be translatable to an American context for several key reasons:

- By incorporating decentralization and local modification in the establishment of Youth and Family Centers, the Netherlands is respectful of the diversity of needs of families and different regions. This is consistent with federalist sentiments in the United States. Likewise, providing a freedom of choice regarding types of support programs respects familial autonomy, which is also essential to any implementation of family policies in the United States.
- The Dutch model of Youth and Family Centers requires links with care organizations and education services can help to provide parents with information regarding early childhood

programs. In the United States, centers could provide links and assistance with filing applications for programs aimed at disadvantaged children like Early Head Start and Head Start. With a widespread cultural concern for cognitive development and the risks to cognitive development often associated with growing up in poverty, Youth and Family Centers can be a resource for parents to learn to foster healthy behaviors, stimulating activities, and how to access appropriate interventions.

- Because parents raising children in poverty experience stresses from economic hardship, any ways to reduce the stresses of childrearing can serve to reduce their overall stresses. This can help to reduce toxic stress levels in homes that may negatively affect children, as portrayed in the family stress model. In order to reduce stresses of childrearing, increasing knowledge about children's developmental stages as well as how parenting behaviors affect children later in life can help to encourage healthy parenting behaviors and ultimately healthier children. Disrupting the number of stresses on parents by teaching positive parenting skills, coping mechanisms, or simply providing stressed parents with a place to ask questions regarding child rearing as well as a place to receive compassion and understanding support can be therapeutic to overwhelmed parents.
- Youth and Family Centers also hold the potential to become a centralized area for prenatal, postnatal, and infant care, in order to mitigate the effects of being born into poverty can have on children. This type of support can also serve to reduce the stresses of parents in poverty through increasing knowledge regarding child rearing – incorporating both the family stress model as well as Sen's capability approach. Consolidating support services with the necessary medical checks and prenatal education eases the stresses on expecting parents of traveling to various doctors, which may be difficult depending on transportation. Given the harmful effects that inadequate prenatal and infant care can have on lifelong development, ensuring that children most at risk in the United States receive attention and care can help to promote well being in future generations.

Whether Dutch inspired Youth and Family Centers could be implemented in the United States remains to be seen; however the factors above seem to encourage at least the discussion of similar resources. Given the extreme diversity of child poverty levels by regions, pilot Youth and Family Centers could be established in counties with the highest child poverty rates. With many parenting programs available on the private market, Youth and Family Centers in the United States have a variety of choices of programs to offer, as well as allow parents a choice in what interventions

fit their needs best. Additionally, establishing a central location for parents raising children in poverty to attain information regarding the federal, state, and local programs like Head Start, Early Head Start, SNAP (food stamps), WIC (supplemental nutrition) and TANF (cash assistance), can reduce the stresses of arranging for transportation, childcare, and time to visit different offices. However, the biggest hindrance towards the adoption of Youth and Family Centers, or even broader family policies remains the United States' strict adherence to non-intervention and skepticism regarding governmental intrusion into family life. Providing supports solely on a market-based private option circumvents this. Parents in poverty and extreme poverty who arguably need the supports most, however, are likely to have difficulty affording programs on the market.

### **Limitations of this research**

Further research into early childhood and parenting supports in the United States can be expected to come in future years given the high rates and severe effects of childhood poverty as well as recent initiatives by high profile politicians. Nonetheless, researching the feasibility of implementing smart practices from abroad in family policies is hindered by the United States outlier status regarding family policies considered commonplace in many other rich nations.

In this research, the refusal of the United States to ratify the UN CRC makes cross-national comparisons difficult, as all other UN nations aim toward its implementation and the United States emphatically does not. Additionally, the federalist structure of the United States and high amount of variance in state policies makes national comparisons difficult, as some states perform extremely well regarding child well being and others perform much less effectively (O'Hare et al., 2012). Even between states, public investments in children and families vary immensely. Contextual differences between nations, and differing national histories regarding the role of government in familial affairs, can also make cross-national implementation of programs or support services more difficult. The scope of this thesis only permitted a few measures, leaving out many important related issues towards child poverty and the stresses of raising children in a state of poverty. Additional factors such as teen pregnancy, parental leave policies, child allowances, as well as the depth of cultural perceptions regarding parenting and children warrant further research that can contribute immensely towards establishing successful family supports in the United States.

Even millennia ago, Plato warned that poverty was the parent to revolution and crime (*Politics*, Book II). Therefore, regardless of anti-statist sentiments surrounding family policies, immediate action toward reducing childhood poverty and mitigating its effects is needed, given the high percentage of children growing up poor and the cyclical nature of poverty.

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