During my tenure in the Senate I have been privileged to witness the extraordinary political forces that have shaped the development of federal child care policy over the past two decades. Today, when issues as diverse as tobacco control and environmental regulation routinely employ child-friendly rhetoric, it is difficult to imagine that in 1983, when Senator Arlen Specter and I established the first Senate Children’s Caucus, children’s needs were more typically an afterthought in federal policy. At that time, while limited federal involvement in education and health care had reached a general degree of acceptance, the idea of a federal role in child care had not recovered from serious defeats in the 1970s. In subsequent years, from the position of chairman and then ranking member of the Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families, I have seen support for a federal role in child care advance dramatically with legislation such as the historic Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 1990 and have watched progress stall from indifference and partisan squabbling. In recent years I have become cautiously optimistic that child care has finally achieved a position on the federal agenda where it can no longer be easily dismissed.

Although enduring concerns remain in the minds of many that federal support for child care encourages parents to abrogate their responsibilities for child rearing, most now acknowledge that in many American families the parents must work. That economic reality coupled with the societal judgment embodied in welfare reform that welfare recipients, even those with very young children, should be in the workplace has helped to focus
national attention on the critical role of affordable child care in promoting self-sufficiency. The growing recognition of employers that employees with stable and affordable child care arrangements are more reliable workers has also had a role in positioning child care as a critical ingredient in maintaining a productive workforce.

Most recently the debate over the federal role in child care has been shaped by developments in unlikely sectors—medical research and law enforcement. Compelling research demonstrating that the early years of life present finite opportunities for children to learn and thrive has triggered unprecedented interest in the quality of child care. Although debates still rage over what constitutes “quality care,” this research has contributed to the movement away from the view of child care as strictly “baby-sitting” and toward the expectation that child care should facilitate healthy child development.

Law enforcement statistics highlighting the rise in crimes committed by adolescents in the hours immediately after school have helped to spark bipartisan concern about the lack of available care for school-age children. Bolstered by the involvement of police chiefs and mayors, policymakers have begun to embrace the idea that structured, productive after-school activities can both keep communities safer and create opportunities for educational enrichment. Advocates for programs for school-age children have also capitalized on the fact that nonparental care for older children tends to generate less concern than the same care for younger children.

Sally Cohen’s book artfully constructs the complex constellation of political factors that has determined the outcome of child care deliberations since 1970. As Cohen points out, no single individual or political party has been successful in advancing child care policy alone. Substantive progress has been made only when policymakers have come together from both sides of the aisle to support child care initiatives. She also aptly demonstrates how the ongoing ambivalence of policymakers across the political spectrum about nonparental child care, particularly for very young children, has colored the debates of the past thirty years.

As Cohen illustrates, presidential interest has played an important role in advancing policy. However, while presidential leadership is critical, it is not by itself sufficient for successful enactment of child care legislation. In addition, she highlights the powerful role that grassroots and organized interests on the national level have played in sustaining the issue and capitalizing on political opportunities. Cohen’s Championing Child Care is a valuable ad-
dition to this national discussion. Cohen demonstrates why increasing par-
ticipation of women in the labor force is only a partial explanation for our
child care policies. Her in-depth and thorough analysis illuminates the po-
litical factors that have shaped federal child care policies since 1970, an
important story that needs to be told. Taking a historical view of child care
gives us a better understanding of effective policies and why some policies,
like federal child care standards, have repeatedly failed. Cohen demonstrates
the strong link between child care legislation and societal interests and con-
cerns, including evolving attitudes toward women and the increasing media
and academic attention to research on early brain development.

Cohen’s book offers an inside glimpse into the powerful forces that have
contributed to our national child care agenda. This book is a critical tool
for anyone interested in child care—federal and state legislators, executive
branch officials, advocacy groups, child care and early education profession-
als, and students of public policy. Individuals of all political persuasions with
a stake in social policies for children should read this book to learn more
about this fascinating chapter in American family policy. I commend Cohen
for making this valuable contribution to our understanding of the politics
and policies that have shaped child care in America.

Senator Christopher Dodd