

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

SOCIETY

We Should Really Just Steal Finland's Baby Box Idea

The case for treating parenting as a public investment, not a private burden

BY MARINA LOPES

Published 6:30, Jul. 12, 2025



A baby box provided by the Finnish government to expectant mothers (Nimetön / Wikicommons)

Listen to this article



POPULAR → Regional Bureaus • Trade War • Rare Minerals • Politics • Games

blanket, a hooded towel with little ears, a fluffy snowsuit, and snow boots puffy enough to keep the smallest toes warm. There was a baby book of nursery rhymes, a stuffed toy, and a sleeping bag. There were also items for her: pads, nipple cream, and even condoms. The box itself transformed into a bassinet, providing an infant with a safe place to sleep.

Isopuro was receiving her baby box—a government-issued kit with everything she would need to care for her baby boy. It was a moment she had been looking forward to for months—a rite of passage that anointed Finnish mothers for generations.

Stories this good should be paywalled—but they're not. Sign up for The Walrus newsletter and get trusted Canadian journalism straight in your inbox.

Type your email

☒ By checking this box I consent to the use of my information for emails from The Walrus.*

Submit

In Finland, parents look to the government for the time, money, and even the onesies required to grow and care for a baby. Today, Finnish moms who attend at least one maternity care appointment before eighteen weeks are given a choice: a baby box with all the supplies they need to care for their little one or a cash equivalent. Ninety-five percent take the box.

“My mom got the box, and I wanted to have it too because it feels so special. It means I’m becoming a mother,” said Isopuro. Plus, she added, “Us Finns are quite proud of the box.”

There’s good reason to be proud. When the Finnish government first started giving out baby boxes to low-income mothers in 1938, infant mortality in Finland was one of the highest in Europe, with sixty-five out of 1,000 babies dying. Many parents slept with their babies in their beds, raising the risk of

By the 1940s, the box became a universal benefit given to all expectant mothers who attended a doctor's appointment for prenatal care. In the years that followed, infant mortality plummeted. Today, Finland has one of the lowest rates in the world. More than sixty countries have copied the baby box model with similar programs of their own. These boxes have already been shown to increase breastfeeding uptake rates and decrease babies' exposure to tobacco smoke. Experts stress that the box is not magical. While it provides infants a safe place to sleep, it also crucially connects women to Finland's robust health care system, one that will continue to care for them throughout their pregnancy.

RELATED LINKS:

- [Want to Raise a Kid in Canada? That'll Be \\$293,000](#)
 - [My Husband Wanted to Have a Child. I Didn't. Here Is How It Went](#)
 - [How Do You Know When Your Kids Have Outgrown You?](#)
-

IT'S STRIKING that accepting help is the first public step you take as a parent in Finland. It is a sign not of defeat but of transition into a new social role—one, it is understood, that will require the support of an entire society, not just a nuclear family.

It's a remarkable norm in a country that prides itself on independence. Tossed among Swedish, Russian, and German possessions for centuries, Finland has developed a culture of self-sufficiency and resilience. Grandparents drilled into their grandkids tales of how they survived invasion, war, and displacement.

Even within relationships, Finns maintain a level of independence foreign to most couples in America. All the people I spoke with split their rent fifty-fifty with their partners, even if married. They kept separate bank accounts and planned on dividing child care expenses evenly.

Still, when it comes to paying for the cost of raising kids, there are no qualms about accepting outside help. Parents are given a total of 360 days of “parental allowance,” or paid days off, starting forty days before the baby’s due date for the birthing parent. It doesn’t stop there. Families also receive “child benefit” payments until their children turn seventeen. These tax-free payments start at \$100 (US) a month but increase depending on the number of children in a family. On average, the government pays \$15,000 (US) in parental benefits to birthing parents and \$3,100 (US) to their partners.

“It’s a lot of work to raise a baby. This aid shows respect to the parents and to the mother who does the work,” said Isopuro. A yoga teacher with no fixed income, she was still reeling from the fallout of the pandemic. She had to dig into savings and work part time as a substitute teacher to make ends meet. Still, thirty-five weeks into her pregnancy, she stepped away from the mat. The \$1,000 (US) a month she receives while she’s on leave helps to cover half of the rent and food for the months she will be home with the baby.

In Finland, parents are given 360 days of “parental allowance,” or paid days off.

The aid also ensures that women with difficult pregnancies are not pushed out of the workforce. Pamela Jokisalo, a thirty-two-year-old nursing professor,

Fiercely independent, at eighteen, she left home and started her studies, working on the side as a supermarket cashier to pay the bills. She loved her job teaching future nurses and was even pursuing a PhD on the side. But by her last trimester, she could no longer endure the strain. “I was exhausted.”

Jokisalo used the Finnish government’s forty-day leave policy to step away from work early without losing her job. The government pays her 90 percent of her average monthly salary, roughly \$2,500 (US) before taxes.

Now, just days before her baby is due, Jokisalo spends her days getting the house ready, while her husband works from home. Not only does the money give her the time and resources to prepare for her baby, but it also secures her ability to provide for him in the future. By paying for the cost of her leave, the government separates her health needs from her employer’s bottom line, ensuring she has a job to return to when her maternity leave is up.

“The policy says that parenthood is valued and that it is financially supported. Because the aid is based on earnings, it also says that employment is important,” said Anneli Miettinen, a researcher at KELA, Finland’s government agency that manages maternity benefits. When I asked her why she thought parents in Finland go through parenthood surrounded by financial support, while parents in America are left to go it alone, Miettinen paused at the question. Her eyes lowered, and when she spoke, her voice was softer, heavier. “It is very difficult to imagine this situation,” she said. “I think women would feel so insecure without this support.”

WHILE IN FINLAND, parenthood is seen as a social good that must be compensated, in America, it is still viewed as a private choice that comes with personal costs and benefits. For a while, this was the case. In agrarian societies, parenthood was an economic investment that benefited

As parents flocked away from the farm and to the factories, children turned from economic asset to liability. A big family meant more mouths to feed, as children spent more time in school and less time growing the family bank account. Even as their economic contributions fell, children's emotional real estate in the family grew. The amount of time parents, especially mothers, spent caring for, nurturing, and playing with their children only increased with the passing of generations.

Parents continued to birth, house, and sustain the next generation free of cost. They were now also tasked with maximizing their children's academic performance, athletic ability, emotional intelligence, and SAT scores. Society reaped the benefits of better-educated, emotionally regulated, high-achieving young adults. Yet the economic support for parents has stagnated.

Of course, parenting, when it is a choice, is not a solely economic one. There is something off-putting about placing any kind of a dollar sum on love. Critics say that the economic argument for children misunderstands a fundamental aspect of parenthood. Parents care for their children not as investments but because they love them. The return happens not in dollars and cents but in hugs and kisses, a moral sense of duty, and the fulfillment of watching your firstborn walk across the stage at graduation.

However, pretending money plays no role in the decision to have kids is an illusion many parents can no longer afford. Raising a child now costs parents a quarter of a million dollars, not including college tuition. That doesn't take into account income lost for parents who drop out of the workforce to care for their kids.

Increasingly, it's a cost parents are not willing or able to shoulder on their own. And thanks to contraception, now they don't have to. For a generation

already at a record low before the pandemic, are now below the necessary replacement level for a post-industrial economy. A woman in America now has only 1.6 children, below the 2.1 needed to replace her and her partner. This trend is likely to accelerate. Almost half of childless adults aged eighteen to forty-nine in the United States now say they don't expect to have children, according to a 2021 Pew Research Survey. That's an increase of seven percentage points from 2018. While there are a myriad of reasons people choose not to have children, the top non-medical one today is money.

As a society, we fail to see the social and economic contributions of parents at our own peril. When people stop having kids, what was once a personal choice becomes a public problem. The consequences ripple through generations. A shrinking population saps our workforce and eats into our tax base, not to mention our social security system, which, after all, is built on income borrowed from future generations. Social security benefits to retired, disabled workers and their families are paid for by taxes drawn from the income of current employees.

That system worked well for decades. But falling fertility rates compounded by rising life expectancy means there are fewer current workers paying for a larger number of retirees than ever. In 1940, there were 159 workers contributing taxes to fund each retiree receiving social security benefits. Today, there are only 2.8 workers for every retiree. Officials estimate that, at this rate, the program's ability to pay for benefits will run out by 2035.

Fertility norms, once in place, are incredibly difficult—and expensive—to reverse, even with family-friendly policies. It's what demographers call the "low fertility trap." First, there is the mathematical reality that fewer births today means fewer potential mothers in the future. But demographers have also seen that reductions in fertility can affect norms for generations.

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

of origin were used to a certain level of affluence and comfort, it is unlikely that they will be willing to sacrifice that in the name of having a larger family.

It turns out that once people stop having kids, it's very hard to change their minds.

Pretending money plays no role in the decision to have kids is an illusion. Raising a child now costs a quarter of a million dollars.

The trap begins, for many demographers, when fertility falls below a rate of 1.5 children per woman. In other words, just below the US's current level. "Possible action to counteract this trend will have a far greater chance of succeeding if it is implemented soon," one study from the Vienna Institute of Demography warns. In other words, if we want to reverse the trend, we have to act now.

Policy can do only so much, but it's better than nothing. France, with its expansive crèche infrastructure, and the Nordic countries that have generous welfare states and family leave policies, have been able to slow the fertility decline that has plagued many of their European neighbours. However, government support isn't a silver bullet for fixing fertility issues. Even Finland, with all its social support, finds itself battling a fertility rate that hovers at 1.5. But fertility issues can present such a pressing problem that

drop below two children per woman in the 1980s. By 2018, the average South Korean woman had 0.7 children. It's a population decline faster than that caused by the Black Plague.

As the demographic pyramid inverts, countries look to automation or immigration to fill the void of young workers. But those solutions are incomplete. What to do about shrinking armies, a dearth of innovation, and economic stagnation? Who will pay those costs?

RATHER THAN fix the problem after the fact, economist Nancy Folbre has argued that it is high time society paid parents for the social services they provide. "Because children are social goods that benefit the economy as a whole, familial commitments to children deserve consistent and equitable public support," she writes in her book *Valuing Children: Rethinking the Economics of the Family*. "Current policies have not done enough to help parents meet the growing costs of child-rearing. Indeed, they have, in a sense, exploited parents by taxing the younger generation to help finance the spending of the older generation with little regard for who devoted time and money to raising those taxpayers."

Part of the problem, experts say, is that parents have struggled to fight for change. It's not their fault. "Generally, I think parents are the worst at advocating for themselves, because they are just too damn tired. It's one more thing in the lives of people who already have too much expected of them," Jennifer Glass, professor in the department of sociology and Population Research Center at the University of Texas, told me. By the time they come up for air, it's a problem for the next generation. "It's going to hit everybody, but it doesn't hit everybody all at once," she said. "Until there is a crisis."

That crisis came in 2020. Battered by the pandemic, when the full weight of supporting the next generation was dumped on their shoulders, many parents

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

credit. American families below a certain income were eligible to receive tax refunds of up to \$300 (US) a month for each child under the age of six.

The impact was seismic, affecting education, nutrition, and child care access. The aid cut the country's child poverty rate in half, to 5 percent, a historic low. Some 3 million children were lifted out of poverty, according to the US Census Bureau. But attempts to extend the tax credit did not gain bipartisan support, and the measures expired at the end of 2021. As the money dried up, the poverty rate for children more than doubled the following year, to 12.4 percent.

Still, the effects of the Child Tax Credit lingered. Americans have historically been opposed to European-style welfare programs—and the high taxes that come with them. But the pandemic gave them a taste of what that kind of support feels like. Now that those programs have ended and the aid is receding, the gaps in support are more glaring than ever. Parents from all backgrounds are demanding more.

More than four in five parents say Congress should reinstate the Child Tax Credit expansion, according to a 2022 survey. That support is bipartisan, with 77 percent of parents who voted for a Republican and 94 percent of parents who voted for a Democrat listing it as a priority.

LEADERS IN Flint, Michigan, are paying attention. The city, where almost 70 percent of children live in poverty, is implementing the country's first city-wide project to give parents a monthly allowance throughout the first year of their child's life.

Beginning in 2024, any pregnant Flint resident is eligible for a one-time payment of \$1,500 (US), delivered halfway through their pregnancy, followed by \$500 (US) a month for the first year of their child's life. The program,

admission of failure. To combat that narrative, Rx Kids talks not about handouts but about empowerment. The website promotes the cash as “no-strings-attached love.” Raising children, the website reminds families, “takes a village of love and support.”

It is high time society paid parents for the social services they provide—“because children are social goods that benefit the economy.”

Mona Hanna-Attisha, founder of the program, said that phrasing is purposeful. “We are trying to send a message that this is how it’s supposed to be. Having a baby and raising a child is hard for everybody, and it is in society’s best interest to care for the future of its nation,” she said. “This is how it is in many other countries. When we fail to invest in moms and babies during this critical window, we pay the consequences.”

Beyond questions of fertility, or morality, helping children get out of poverty has proven health benefits. Low-income status in childhood has been associated with everything from shorter life expectancy to depression, substance abuse, and infant mortality. But when societies support parents financially, their children benefit via better academic performance, higher earnings in adulthood, and even increases in brain activity.

Flint resident Alana Turner was twenty weeks pregnant with her second baby when she found out about the Rx program. At first, she thought it was too

car seat, and start a savings account for emergencies. The aid also means she won't have to rush back to work immediately after giving birth, an experience that left her traumatized after she had her first baby four years ago.

At the time, she was working at a hotel that gave her no paid maternity leave. She asked for six weeks of unpaid leave to recover, but a month in, her boss demanded she return to work early or find another job. Forced to return weeks after giving birth, she said, the separation from her newborn was brutal. She was still breastfeeding, having to pump several times a day, and constantly worried about whether he had enough milk at home, where her mom was caring for him.

This time around, Alana is determined to have a more peaceful transition out of postpartum for her and her baby. The Rx money has given her peace of mind that she will be able to pay her bills while working one part-time job from home until both she and her baby are ready for her to return. "It feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I am going back into the workforce knowing I will have a lifeline."

Excerpted, with permission, from Please Yell at My Kids: What Cultures around the World Can Teach You about Parenting in Community, Raising Independent Kids, and Not Losing Your Mind by Marina Lopes, published by Hachette Book Group, 2025. All rights reserved.

[About Marina Lopes \(View all articles\)](#)

Marina Lopes is a Brazilian American journalist who has written about feminism, caregiving, and motherhood across five continents. Her work has been published by the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the BBC, PBS, *Vice*, and others. She lives in Washington, DC, with her husband and two children.

As the executive director, I am frequently asked this question. These days, I reply: “The Walrus was made for this moment.” From on-again, off-again trade news and negotiations to a new prime minister, we are committed to Canada’s conversations. We launched six regional bureaus earlier this year to ensure comprehensive coverage across this great country of ours. But we can’t do this alone. As a non-profit newsroom, this work isn’t possible without our readers’ support. If you believe in Canada’s stories, support our paywall-free journalism with a donation today.

Our team is small, but our commitment is big; just like our country. Every story we publish is the result of writers, artists, and editors going the extra mile (well, kilometres) to bring Canada closer together through compelling, fact-checked, and regionally grounded reporting.

Thank you for your support.



Jennifer Hollett

Executive Director, The Walrus

Yes, I'll Help

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

**Why Everyone You Know
Is Suddenly a Birder**

**How I Solved the Century-
Old Mystery of a
Miraculous Shipwreck
Survivor**

**The Dearly Departed Are
Getting Creative with
Death**

The Walrus newsletter

Stories this good should be paywalled—but they're not. Sign up today.

Enter your email address

By signing up, I consent to The Walrus' [Privacy Policy](#).

Sign Up

[View all newsletters](#)

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

About The Walrus

Events

Subscribe

Newsletters

Subscribe



Donate

POPULAR → Regional Bureaus ▪ Trade War ▪ Rare Minerals ▪ Politics ▪ Games

Follow Us

Support Independent Canadian Reporting and Storytelling

Make A Donation

[Accessibility Help](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Cookie Policy](#)

The Walrus is located within the bounds of Treaty 13 signed with the Mississaugas of the Credit. This land is also the traditional territory of the Anishnabeg, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples.

© 2025 The Walrus. All Rights Reserved.

Charitable Registration Number: No. 861851624-RR0001