Child Care Quality: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How To Improve It

All parents want high-quality care for their children that helps them develop their potential, ensures that they are cared for in safe, healthy environments, and enables them to enter school ready to succeed. However, there is a shortage of accessible, affordable, high-quality child care, leaving parents with too few choices. Research shows that many children are in poor or mediocre care, which can jeopardize their health, safety, and development.

Key Components of High-Quality Child Care

- Research demonstrates that children have better outcomes if they participate in high-quality child care programs, which have several essential characteristics, including:
  - Basic protections for children’s safety and health.
  - Well-educated teachers who are caring, knowledgeable in child development, and well-compensated.
  - Low child-teacher ratios and appropriate group sizes that allow children to receive personal attention from their teachers.
  - An age-appropriate curriculum that encourages learning and supports children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.
  - Parents who are engaged in their children’s learning and help foster their children’s development.¹

High-Quality Child Care Promotes Children’s Ability to Succeed in School

- Children in higher-quality care display greater language ability and pre-math skills, view their child care and themselves more positively, have warmer relationships with their teachers, and have more advanced social skills than those in lower-quality classrooms. These findings hold true for all children, although high-quality care has particularly strong positive impacts on at-risk children.²

- Studies show that poor-quality care can significantly impact a child’s development. Children in poor-quality care have weaker reading and cognitive skills and display more aggression towards other children and adults.³

- Nearly half (46 percent) of kindergarten teachers report that at least half of their class has specific problems with school readiness, including difficulty following directions, lack of academic skills, disorganized home environments, and/or difficulty working independently.⁴

In addition, teachers in districts with higher levels of poverty, in urban districts, and with
larger proportions of minority students report greater rates of difficulty in school transition. Children need higher-quality early care and education experiences that better prepare them for school.

- The impact of high-quality child care and early education continues to be seen throughout a child’s education, especially for low-income children. Studies show that low-income children who receive high-quality child care and early education are less likely to be held back a grade and are more likely to attend college than their peers who did not enroll in such programs, according to several studies.

**Despite the Importance of High-Quality Care to Children, It Is Not Widely Available**

- Even though strong licensing requirements that mandate low child-teacher ratios and provider training can help improve child care quality, many states do not set adequate standards in these areas. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recommends that a single caregiver be responsible for no more than four infants, six toddlers, or 10 preschool-age children. However, only one state and the District of Columbia mandate that child care centers meet these standards for children through age four, and 12 states do not require that child care centers meet any of these standards for children through age four. In addition, 11 states allow directors of child care centers and 39 states allow child care teachers to begin working with children without any training in early childhood education.

- A four-state study of child care centers conducted in 1995 found that only one in seven child care centers provided good-quality care—care that promotes healthy development—and that only one in 12 infant and toddler rooms provided developmentally appropriate care. This study found that 74 percent of child care centers were mediocre quality and 12 percent of child care centers were poor quality. Among rooms serving infants and toddlers, 51 percent were mediocre quality and 40 percent were poor quality.

- A 2000 study of child care settings in four Midwestern states rated nearly half (49 percent) of the settings as mediocre and rated about one-fifth (18 percent) as poor. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of center-based care for infants was considered mediocre, with another 8 percent rated as poor, while 43 percent of family child care was determined to be mediocre, with a full 27 percent considered poor.

**Federal and State Strategies That Can Improve Child Care Quality**

- To ensure that more low-income children have access to higher-quality care, the federal government should increase overall funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the major federal child care program, as well as the proportion of CCDBG funds that is targeted toward improving the quality of care. Currently, states are required to spend a minimum of 4 percent of their CCDBG funds on quality activities; in 2005, states exceeded this minimum, devoting 10 percent of total federal and state expenditures to quality activities. States use these funds for purposes such as teacher education and professional development, teacher compensation initiatives, grants and loans to child care programs and
providers, monitoring compliance with licensing and regulatory requirements, activities to promote early language and literacy, and consumer education.  

- Strong state licensing regulations can improve the quality of child care. One four-state study found that states with more demanding licensing standards have fewer poor-quality child care centers. A separate study involving Midwestern states found that family child care that required licensing and annual inspections was twice as likely to be labeled as good quality as registered care that did not require inspections or care that was exempt from licensing or regulation.  

- Basic safety and health standards—such as requiring that all playground equipment is surrounded by soft surfaces, that children are immunized and that a current health record is maintained for each child, and that toxic substances are kept out of reach from children—can reduce accidents, prevent illnesses, and save children’s lives.  

- High-quality learning environments and teachers with training in early childhood education can reach children more effectively, provide age-appropriate instruction, and lead to improved early reading skills and development. One way to encourage teachers to receive such training is through initiatives such as the T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project and the Child Care WAGE$® Project. These programs support scholarships and salary supplements for providers that have formal child care credentials or training beyond the high school level as a means to help improve child care quality. T.E.A.C.H. is designed to encourage providers to further their education, while WAGE$ is designed to attract, retain, and reward teachers who already have higher education levels. Twenty-one states were implementing T.E.A.C.H., and four states had licensed WAGE$® Projects as of 2008.  

- North Carolina’s Smart Start initiative provides funds to local communities for a range of early childhood programs and services, including activities to improve the quality of care through training, technical assistance, grants for materials and facilities, education scholarships and salary supplements for teachers, higher reimbursement rates for higher-quality child care, and other efforts. Smart Start has produced positive results for child care programs and the children they serve, according to a study involving 110 child care centers observed between 1994 and 1999 and again in 2002. The quality of the centers steadily and significantly improved between 1993 and 2002. In addition, participation in Smart Start-funded activities was significantly positively related to quality. Finally, children in higher-quality centers demonstrated significantly better cognitive and language skills and abilities than children in lower-quality centers, after accounting for the children’s background characteristics.  

- By setting adequate reimbursement rates for providers serving children who receive child care assistance, states increase the likelihood that providers will be willing to serve these children and that parents will have a choice of good child care. States can further ensure that good-quality providers agree to accept subsidies by providing higher rates to providers who meet higher quality standards. Such tiered reimbursement systems can give a financial incentive to providers to improve and the resources to do so. Thirty-one states, and the District of Columbia, pay higher reimbursement rates to programs that are nationally
Sixteen states had statewide child care quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) as of April 2008. Under these systems, child care homes and centers are rated based on the extent to which they meet a set of quality criteria addressing areas such as teacher credentials, child-staff ratios, and classroom learning environments. The quality ratings give parents useful information about the quality of a child care center or home. States provide resources and incentives to help child care centers and homes steadily improve their quality ratings.

States can look to the military’s systemic approach to child care that simultaneously seeks to improve the quality, affordability, and availability of child care. The U.S. Department of Defense, in its Military Child Development System, mandates basic standards for health, safety, child-staff ratios, and staff training that are enforced in all child care settings; requires accreditation for all military child care centers; sets wages at levels comparable to military occupations requiring the same skills and ties wages and advancement for child care workers in its centers to caregiver training to reduce staff turnover; links child care centers, family child care homes, before- and after-school programs, and resource and referral services to assist parents in finding care through a single point of entry; and subsidizes the cost of high-quality child care for all families with a sliding fee schedule based on income to ensure that personnel with the lowest incomes can afford child care. A study by the National Women’s Law Center on developments since 2000 found that the military has continued to build on its comprehensive system of child care, and made a range of improvements, notably in integrating its youth programs, strengthening accreditation, and expanding a range of child care support. Its compensation system has kept pace with inflation and its parent fees have increased at less than the rate of inflation.
Sources:


5 Pianta and La Paro.


11 Helburn, et. al.

12 Helburn, et. al.

13 Helburn, et. al.
15 The Gallup Organization, 68.
18 Helburn, et al.
19 The Gallup Organization, 68.
27 National Association for the Education of Young Children, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation (2008), available at http://www.naeyc.org/policy/state/pdf/FactSheetQRS.pdf (last visited Apr. 17, 2008); E-mail from Davida McDonald, National Association for the Education of Young Children, to Karen Schulman, National Women’s Law Center, Apr. 17, 2008.