



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: Improving Children’s Early Experiences

Approximately 12 million-- three out of five-- children birth to five years of age regularly participate in early childhood programs. Among the youngest children, whose development is occurring the most rapidly and is most sensitive to environmental influences, 61% of children ages 0-6 and 55% of infants under one year participate in early childhood programs.

policy brief

Parents face many problems when choosing early childhood programs, including both the lack of available high quality care and the high cost of care. In a large national study, six out of seven programs evaluated were rated as poor to mediocre by early childhood professionals. Furthermore, one out of three facilities caring for infants and toddlers were rated as potentially harmful environments.

Research findings show poor quality care can have devastating short- and long-term effects on young children. On the other hand, high quality programs can have positive short- and long-term effects, and can even partially compensate for a poor home environment. Furthermore, high quality care has important benefits to families, employers and communities. For every \$1 spent on providing high quality early childhood programs, society saves \$7 in long-term reductions in delinquency, crime, and welfare dependence.

Effects of the Quality of Early Childhood Education on Children & Families

	Low-Quality Programs	High-Quality Programs
Effects on Behavior	Increased non-compliance; More conduct problems; More difficulty with peers	Less aggression; More cooperation and pro-social acts towards adults and peers; More focused task orientation
Effects on Language Development	Poorer communication skills; Slower vocabulary acquisition	Better verbal abilities; Better expressive language; Better pre-reading skills
Effects on Cognitive Development	Lower IQ scores	Higher IQ scores; More creative play; Greater mathematical ability
Effects on Socioemotional Development	Poorer social skills; Less consideration for others; Poorer likelihood of secure attachment to caregiver	Increased likelihood of secure attachment to caregiver; Better emotional well-being in grade school; More positive expression
Effects on Long-Term Child Outcomes	More likely to need special education services; Higher likelihood of juvenile delinquency and adult arrests	Higher academic achievement throughout school; More likely to graduate high school; Higher adult income levels
Effects on Parents and Their Employers	Higher turnover; Higher absenteeism	More likely to be employed and remain working; Higher productivity on the job

The High Cost of Care

The cost of child care is often prohibitive for young families who are at the beginning of their earning power. Families at or below the poverty level typically spend as much as 1/3 of their income on child care expenses. Working poor families at 200% of the poverty level typically spend 1/4 of their earnings on child care. Higher quality programs typically cost more than lower quality programs, making high quality programs less accessible to low-income families. Low-income families are more likely to use lower quality care or to depend upon less reliable informal care arrangements, often making it difficult for them to work during standard business hours or to keep consistent hours. Currently, child care subsidies are available for Missouri families whose incomes fall below 128% of the poverty level. This leaves many low to moderate income families struggling to pay for child care. Nationally, due to insufficient program funding, only 14 percent of eligible families receive child care assistance.

Low Teacher Qualifications

Low teacher qualifications contribute to the low quality of care. *Note the following comparison:*

Nail technicians: 390 hours of accredited training

Barbers: 1000 hours of accredited training

Cosmetologists: 1500 hours of accredited training

Child care providers: No pre-service training required; 12 hours of training during each year of employment.

Low Wages for Professionals

Despite the fact that 70-80% of the average child care center's budget is allocated for labor costs, early childhood professionals are not earning a fair wage. The average salary of a child care center teacher is \$17,630 a year. Furthermore, many teachers work without benefits. Studies indicate that one-quarter to one-half of teachers do not have health insurance. Low wages and lack of benefits contribute to high turnover rates in the field of early childhood education. The turnover rate for early childhood professionals is currently 31% per year. High turnover rates are related to lower quality care in programs and poorer developmental outcomes.

Policy Recommendations

➤ **Increase subsidies for licensed and accredited providers.**

Increasing subsidies for licensed and accredited providers will enable more families to meet the higher costs of quality care and insure that more children are cared for in high quality environments.

➤ **Enable more eligible families to receive child care subsidies by increasing program funding, raising income eligibility levels and simplifying application processes.**

Assisting low income families with these expenses can lift more children out of poverty. Also, it will enable families to use more reliable sources of care and enable them to be more productive and reliable employees.

➤ **Provide financial incentives to early childhood educators.**

Raising the wages for early childhood educators, based on formal education, will insure that more high quality professionals stay in the field and enable and encourage them to seek more continuing education opportunities.

➤ **Increase state funding for full-day Early Head Start programs.**

This will allow young children (birth to three years of age) from low-income families to attend programs with quality standards.

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