



University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development

Early Childhood Care & Education In Pennsylvania

In The Care Of Others

More children in early services than ever before

Whether they are rich, poor, live in urban or rural communities, the trend is the same: An increasing number of Pennsylvania children are spending significant amounts of time in child care and early education programs. Today, nearly two-thirds of families use such services on a weekly basis.

Such heightened reliance on early childhood services suggests that it is more important than ever to ensure that families have access to child care and education programs that not only provide for the safety of these children, but nurture their development during the critical early years.

Although most Pennsylvania families today find themselves depending on such services, their experiences are not the same, according to a family survey done by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative (UCPC). Income levels, education level of parents, where they live, and other characteristics are associated with the type of early childhood services they enroll their children in and the quality of the learning experiences those services offer.

The family survey is one of five recent studies based on six months of research by UCPC, a collaborative of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University.

Statewide Demand

UCPC researchers report that 64% of Pennsylvania families have their chil-

dren under 6 years old in some type of child care or early education program on a regular weekly basis – a significant increase from two decades earlier when 25% of families placed their children in such services.

Experts do not expect the use of early childhood services to wane anytime soon, due to such trends as welfare-to-work rules that limited cash welfare subsidies and encourage low-income parents to find employment.

Many young children are already spending significant numbers of hours in the care of others each week. About 43% of children under age 6 spend at least 20 hours a week in child care or early education and 26% spend at least 35 hours per week in those services.

"The many similarities across metropolitan, small cities, and rural areas suggest that child care concerns are pervasive across Pennsylvania," said Marsha Weinraub, Ph.D., Laura H. Carnell

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Professor of Psychology at Temple University.

Some family characteristics are related to the type of early care and education children are enrolled in. For example:

- Parents with higher levels of education are more likely to have their children in educational programs or centers outside the home.
- Wealthier families are more likely to use education programs or center-based care.
- Families in small towns and rural areas tend to rely more on family care.

Most early childhood arrangements have been stable – the survey shows that only 7% of families made changes in children's educational arrangements in the last year.

But relatively few Pennsylvania children attend programs that emphasize early

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childhood education. Only 44% of preschool-age children attend an educational early childhood program of any kind.

Poor and minority 3- and 4-year-old children are even less likely to attend center-based or educational early childhood programs.

Perceived Quality

In the eyes of more than two-thirds of Pennsylvania parents, the child care or early education program they employ does an excellent job enhancing their child's social and cognitive development. Few rated their provider "not very good" or "very bad."

Researchers caution, however, that parents tend to overestimate the quality of their child care or early education setting.

There is strong evidence that this is the case among Pennsylvania parents. UCPC researchers report that 80% of the early childhood care and education programs across the state had quality scores ranging from mediocre/adequate to poor – levels not likely to produce the full benefits of an early childhood education. Characteristics of high-quality programs include well-educated teachers with early childhood training, an intensive educational approach, high standards, low child-teacher ratios, and other factors.

Cost and Affordability

One factor influencing access to quality early childhood services is the cost of the programs. This is especially true for low-income families.

Costs of these services cover a wide range. The UCPC family survey reports, for example, that the average cost for the in-home care – the least expensive option – is \$2.46 an hour,

while care provided at a center averages \$3.40/hour. The average monthly expenditure per family for early childhood care or education is \$336.

The survey also offers a glimpse of why many lower-income families find it difficult to pay for early childhood services on their own. Families whose earnings fall below \$25,000 a year must devote 5%-18% of their income on child care and education. Families earning more than \$100,000 pay between 1% and 5% of their income on early childhood services.

Only 14% of all families receive some financial assistance – a figure lower than the percent of families below the federal poverty line. Also, only about one-half of the families who were eligible for government subsidies were actually using them.

As a result, low-income children are less likely to get the kind of quality services that help promote school readiness.

Public Support

UCPC researchers also report wide public support for early childhood services and for government getting involved in widening access to child care and early education.

Some 56% of the parents surveyed felt the government should play a role in helping children become school ready.

And 88% said they support spending tax dollars on early care and education. This sentiment was consistently expressed by parents with children age 6 or younger throughout Pennsylvania, regardless of neighborhood or family characteristics.

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references

This report was based largely on the following studies conducted by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative.

- Benchmarking Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Pennsylvania Family Survey (Written by Center for Public Policy, Temple University). www.temple.edu/CPP/current_proj/proj14.htm.
- A Baseline Report of Early Care and Education in Pennsylvania: The 2002 Early Care and Education Provider Survey (Written by University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development). www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm.
- Pennsylvania Quality of Early Childhood Settings Study (Written by Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University). www.prevention.psu.edu/ECE.

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