



Supporting Quality Child Care: What Should We Do?

Child care quality is an issue that concerns Iowans.

Parents, educators, business leaders, and public policy decision makers want the best for young children.

- Parents want safe, nurturing care.
- Educators are concerned about school readiness.
- Employers are interested in support for working parents.
- Policy makers view child care as a critical component for economic development.

Quality care in the early years predicts later success academically and socially.

From research we know that the first three to five years of a child's brain development form a crucial foundation for later development. Research tells us that the *quality* of child care influences how well children will do later on in school. Studies also show that children in higher quality care during their early years will have stronger language development and social skills.



Poor quality child care creates hardships for families and poor outcomes for children. Ensuring quality care is a key to providing a

strong community foundation for early care and education.

What is quality care?

Experts look at a wide range of factors to measure child care quality. They look closely at factors such as education and experience of the caregiver, learning activities for children, and health and safety practices.

Quality can range from poor to excellent. Adults who give poor care, seem to have very little understanding of children's needs as compared to excellent care where each child gets individual attention and the care is truly "in-tune" with the needs of each child.

Numerous studies tell us child care quality is improved when we have:

- Educated caregivers
- Adults who are responsive and nurturing.
- Adequate pay and benefits
- Low staff turnover
- Small group size
- Learning activities that are interesting and appropriate for young children
- Safe indoor and outdoor environments.
- Consistent health practices such as hand washing
- Nutritious meals and snacks
- Consistently enforced regulation for all caregivers.

Recent research indicates that much of Iowa's child care is of poor or mediocre quality.

Although we do have some good child care in Iowa, a growing body of research indicates that Iowans should be very concerned about the overall lack of child care quality.

Midwest Child Care Research Consortium

A recent study of child care in Iowa, Nebraska, Missouri, and Kansas examined the quality of full-day, full-year child care. Findings show that of the child care in Iowa::

- 20 percent is rated good
- 58 percent is rated mediocre
- 22 percent is rated poor
- Infant care centers and family child care homes in Iowa were significantly lower in quality than child care in these other three Midwest states.

The Midwest study also found that Iowa has a less strict regulatory environment than neighboring states; and, it has fewer state-wide, high quality training programs.

Kindergarten Teacher Perception Survey

The Iowa Department of Education surveys kindergarten teachers each year as one measure of school readiness. According to the 2004 survey, kindergarten teachers reported that

- Two-thirds of Iowa children entering kindergarten lacked the communication skills necessary to succeed in kindergarten
- Over half of the children lacked the thinking skills or self-management skills expected.

Early Care and Education Workforce Study (2003)

In a recent state-wide study of the child care workforce, Iowa caregivers reported:

- Low levels of education
- Low income
- Lack of benefits
- High turnover rates
- Inadequate training.

A very high percentage of teachers and assistant teachers reported that they had not completed the hours of annual training required by licensing during the previous 12 months.

Thirty-four percent of registered family child care providers reported receiving NO child care related training within the previous 12-month period.



What is the best way to ensure that children receive quality care?

Hard questions are being asked about how to improve the quality of child care. Through this community conversation, we want to explore our policy options, and listen to others to find common ground for action.

Three Points of View

Choice #1: Governmental Regulation

Choice #2: Information & Education for Parents

Choice #3: Parental Care

Choice #1: Regulation is Necessary for Quality Care



Children are our state's priority, or at least they should be. All children deserve to be healthy and successful. The most effective way to guarantee that early care prepares children to succeed in school and life, is to establish strong regulations that child care providers in both the public and private sectors must meet.

What can be done?

- **Establish new comprehensive regulations** based on expert views of optimal care for all child care providers.
- **Enforce regulations** with regular, unannounced monitoring visits and institute sanctions such as fines and suspension of licenses for violators.
- **Provide public funds for training and technical assistance** to help care providers meet the licensing standards.
- **Develop funding sources to subsidize care** for low-income families and expand access to early childhood education programs for all families.
- **Extend quality, licensed care and education to all children** by providing publicly funded programs for children from birth to age 5 in all communities, and fully funding after-school and summer programs as extensions of the public school system.

Supporters of this approach would say:

"We have to act now to mandate improvements in child care quality."

"We can't expect young families to shoulder all the costs of quality child care."

"It is a logical extension of our public school system to provide quality care for all young children, given the realities of parents' employment outside the home."

Opponents would say:

"This approach substantially increases society's collective responsibility for the well-being of young children and runs counter to beliefs in self responsibility and less government involvement in people's lives."

"More government regulation and enforcement would be too costly and often is ineffective."

"It would limit parental choice, and simply create an "underground" market of unregulated care providers—increasing the gap between income groups."

"No amount of regulation will guarantee a nurturing care provider."

There are also tradeoffs.

Increased regulation offers accountability and guaranteed minimum standards of quality care, but raises costs and limits family choices. If publicly funded, the monetary costs of such an extensive approach may result in giving up other programs.

Choice #2: Let Informed Parents Choose Care



The best way to improve quality is a voluntary system. Parents or other guardians of young children have the

responsibility to make informed decisions about child care.

If parents have access to information about quality care and child care options available within the community, they will demand excellent care for their children.

What can be done?

- **Educate parents and child care providers** about the impact that the quality of child care has on children's development and how to evaluate information about child care choices.
- **Establish a set of voluntary standards**, much like a "seal of approval" or consumer product testing gold star rating.
- **Create a consumer guide** describing price and quality characteristics of all providers.
- **Offer financial incentives** such as training scholarships or tax credits to encourage child care providers to improve their skills and their programs to meet the designated standards.
- **Tie child care subsidies** to only those providers who meet the standards.
- **Expand child care subsidies to low- and moderate families** on a sliding scale, improve child support enforcement, and encourage employers and local charities to contribute, so that price is not a barrier to good quality care for all children.

Supporters of this approach would say:

"We should let the market system work and not burden child care providers with excessive government regulation."

"Competition will weed out low quality care providers."

"With access to useful information, parents can be empowered to make good choices for their children."

"A voluntary system builds on a system already in place in the child care profession and moves the industry forward without a lot of government involvement."

Opponents would say:

"Not all parents would act responsibly or take the time to educate themselves."

"A voluntary approach could create huge differences in the quality of care that is offered."

"Meeting specified standards is expensive in terms of time and money, and without strong incentives, most care providers simply wouldn't want to incur those costs. Only those who could afford to pay would have access to quality care."

"A monitoring system to make sure care providers maintain standards and the resources to keep a report system up-to-date are unnecessary expenses."

There are also tradeoffs.

A voluntary system of standards helps parents identify quality care and allows them freedom of choice; but, without an effective monitoring system there are no assurances that quality will be maintained.

Education and subsidies empower parents, but do not guarantee that they will make the decision to purchase high quality care for their children.

Choice #3: Parents Provide the Best Care

Parents know their children's needs better than anyone else. A parent's "job" is to parent – to nurture and care for their children. As a choice to bring children into this world, they accept the responsibility. Children need generous amounts of love, time and attention from their parents, not someone else. Individuals and families have become so materialistic and consumer oriented – families need to reevaluate their values and focus on essentials. Parental care is best for children.



What can be done?

- **Families should reevaluate their priorities** so children come first and parents are the primary caregivers during the critical early years.
- **Expand parenting education to all parents** so they have the skills to do this important job.
- **Provide stronger financial support** (paid parental leave, child allowances or tax credits) so parent(s) can reduce or eliminate paid work outside the home.
- **Provide flexible work opportunities** for two parent families: split-shifts, flex time or job sharing.



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Supporters of this approach would say:

"More parents need the option of staying home while children are young."

"High quality child care outside the home is not affordable for most young families; it is more cost effective for society to support parents as primary care givers."

"Public dollars and family-friendly employers can make parental care feasible."

Opponents would say:

"This approach ignores the reality that not all parents thoughtfully choose to have children and even for those who do, life experiences such as a death, divorce, or domestic violence may later limit their ability to provide care at home."

"Some parents don't necessarily have the parenting skills needed and children receive better care elsewhere—for at least some hours of the day—from a nurturing adult."

"Parents are responsible for the care of their own children; those who don't have children shouldn't have to subsidize child care."

There are also tradeoffs.

If we support parents to stay at home we lose productive workers in our economy.

Public support to young families may require cuts in programs for those at later life stages.