

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.

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.

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.

Research tells us quality of child care improves with:

- Educated caregivers
- Adequate pay and benefits
- Low staff turnover
- Small group size
- Appropriate curriculum
- Consistently enforced regulation

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.

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.

Choice #1: Government Regulation

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 comprehensive regulations of optimal care for all providers
- Enforce regulation and suspend licenses for violators
- Provide training and assistance to help providers meet licensing standards
- Publicly funded early care and education—available to all children

Supporters of this approach would say:

- A quality crisis requires mandating improvements.
- Consequences of poor care have long-term effects.
- Publicly funded care and education available for all children is a logical step given parents' employment trends.

Opponents of this approach would say:

- This approach substantially increases society's collective responsibility for the well-being of young children.
- More government regulation and enforcement would be too costly and often is ineffective.
- 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.

The monetary costs of such an extensive approach are immense.

Choice #2:

Information and Education for Parents

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 about quality care and child development
- Establish voluntary standards for providers to meet; tie child care subsidies to only those providers who meet the standards
- Create consumer guide describing price and quality characteristics of all providers
- Expand child care subsidies to families on a sliding scale, enforce child support payments, encourage employers and communities to contribute—so price isn't a barrier

Supporters of this approach would say:

- Information empowers parents to make good choices.
- Don't burden providers with excessive government regulation.
- Competition will "weed out" poor quality care.

Opponents of this approach 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.
- Only those who could afford to pay would have access to quality care.

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:

Parental Care

Children need generous amounts of love, time and attention from their parents, not someone else. Parental care is best for children.

What can be done?

- Parents need to reevaluate priorities so children come first
- Expand parent education to all parents
- Provide parental leaves, split-shifts, flex time and job sharing
- Fund child allowances or tax credits

Supporters of this approach would say:

- More parents need the option of staying home while their children are young.
- High quality child care is not affordable for most young families.
- Public dollars and "family friendly" employers can make parental care feasible.

Opponents of this approach would say:

- Not all parents thoughtfully choose to have children. For some, life experiences such as a death, divorce, or domestic violence may limit their ability to provide care at home.
- Some parents don't necessarily have the parenting skills needed and children receive better care elsewhere.
- 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.