



University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development

# background

Report # 49

Shortage of Quality Early Childhood Services

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## Early Childhood Care & Education In Pennsylvania

# Too Few Good Programs

*Shortage of quality early services is deepening*

**M**ost of Pennsylvania's children do not have access to the kind of quality early childhood care and education programs that promote the full potential of early learning. While limited family finances prevent some children from enrolling, the problem is much broader: An already serious shortage of high-quality early childhood services appears to be getting worse.

To begin with, fewer than 20% of the early childhood programs across the state offer the kind of environments found to produce benefits ranging from higher achievement in math and science to lower rates of serious behavioral problems and delinquency.

Studies also suggest the quality of the most widely-used childcare settings in Pennsylvania – centers, family child-care homes, and group childcare homes – is declining.

The findings, reported by the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative, are the result of six months of research on early childhood care and education in the state. UCPC is a collaborative of the Pennsylvania State University Prevention Research Center, the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development, and the Center for Public Policy of Temple University and provides nonpartisan information on issues important to the well-being of children, youth, and families.

Quality is not a luxury. Substandard services deny children the full benefits offered by early learning. Poor quality care and education can actually harm some children's development.

Characteristics of high-quality pro-

grams include well-educated teachers with early childhood training, an intensive educational approach, low child-teacher ratios, small group sizes, low staff turnover, high standards, and monitoring, accreditation, and adequate teacher compensation.

### **Mediocre, At Best**

Unfortunately, most early education programs and child care arrangements in Pennsylvania don't meet high quality standards, according to a UCPC survey of 372 Head Start programs, preschools, child care centers, family child care homes, group child care homes, and legally unregulated/relative/neighbor care arrangements.

More than 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 early childhood education.

"The majority of Pennsylvania

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children are in child care settings that are, at best, mediocre in quality and in many cases are of poor quality," said Mark Greenberg, Ph.D., Director of the Prevention Research Center at Pennsylvania State University.

Head Start offers the highest quality early childhood services – a ranking due to having well-educated staff, national standards, and rigorous monitoring. But the part-day, nine-month program serves only 50% of eligible children.

Preschools and nursery schools ranked second in quality scores, followed by center-based and home-based programs.

More than 61% of center-based programs scored at the minimal or below quality levels. Only 15% scored in the good range. In contrast, 8% of Head Start programs scored in the minimal quality level and 46% scored in the good range.

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Home-based providers scored even lower than center-based programs on quality measures. Home-based care – family home, group home, and neighbor-relative arrangements – is the most widely used type of child care in Pennsylvania. Some 75% of those arrangements scored in the minimal quality or below levels. None were in the good level. Among the arrangements of this type, unregulated relative/neighbor care had the lowest quality scores of all of the types of early care and education.

### Curriculum Helps

Having a curriculum in place helped to improve the overall quality scores of most early education and child care arrangements. Use of curriculum is related to better quality in several areas, including the informal use of language, helping children understand language, and helping children to reason.

Curriculum appears to have its biggest impact among family child care homes. Among this type of arrangement, those that used curriculum significantly raised their quality level.

Providers who use a curriculum and employ well-educated teachers were found to have programs of high quality.

### Providers Vary

A UCPC survey of early childhood care and education providers shows some of the characteristics, strengths, and weakness of programs across Pennsylvania. For example:

- Staff turnover in early care and education programs varies with the quality and income of the families served. The average turnover was 19%. But turnover was nearly 33% in low quality sites and about 21% in sites that served low-income families.

- Rural counties have a shortage of center-based programs and accredited facilities.
- In child care centers and pre-schools, accreditation was related to higher quality.
- Center-based services provide more planned curricular experiences and programs that help improve children's school readiness than do home-based services.

### Quality Levels Falling

Among the more troubling findings reported by the UCPC is the decline in quality among child care centers, family child care homes, and group child care homes over the last five years that has pushed most to below adequate/mediocre levels. Many of these programs have fallen into poor quality categories, suggesting that more children are exposed to environments that risk harming their development.

The findings are based on

UCPC's quality study and studies measuring quality of early childhood services in Pennsylvania from 1990-1996. The earlier studies reported an increase in the quality of early childhood services. The latest data suggests those gains have since been lost.

Both periods experienced increases in the number of programs and children enrolled. But today, there are far fewer well-educated teachers on the payrolls of early childhood programs. In 1996, for example, 25% of the infant toddler teachers had bachelor's degrees. In 2000, the percent with degrees fell to 5%.

"The quality has dropped off significantly in centers and homes, which is a major concern because that is where the majority of the children are," said Richard Fiene, Ph.D., Director of the Capital Area Early Childhood Training Institute at Pennsylvania State University. "If I were a parent, I would be really concerned about where to place my child."

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## references

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

- Pennsylvania Quality of Early Childhood Settings Study (Written by Prevention Research Center, Pennsylvania State University). [www.prevention.psu.edu/ECE](http://www.prevention.psu.edu/ECE).
- 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](http://www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/policy21.htm).

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