

Quality Child Care & Early Learning

Introduction

In an article by Marlys Ann Boschee and Gera Jacobs regarding quality child care they note that, "Child care has become an essential component of life in our society. Quality child care can make a significant difference in children's development. For many years researchers have been examining the aspects of child care that have a positive influence on children's development."¹ The reality of children younger than six in some type of child care or early learning setting is evident in South Dakota.

In South Dakota, 74% of children younger than age six had parents in the workforce as compared to the national average of 62%.² With a high percentage of parents in the workforce today, child care and early learning is not only important to families, but also is an essential component of community infrastructure in South Dakota.

This issue of Facts on KIDS in South Dakota will focus on quality child care. Research on quality child care will be reviewed and the significance of quality child care for South Dakotans will be highlighted.

Need for child care & early learning

In the early 1990s beginning at six months of age, the majority of children received part-time care from someone other than their parents. The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development's demographically and ethnically diverse sample of more than 1,000 children

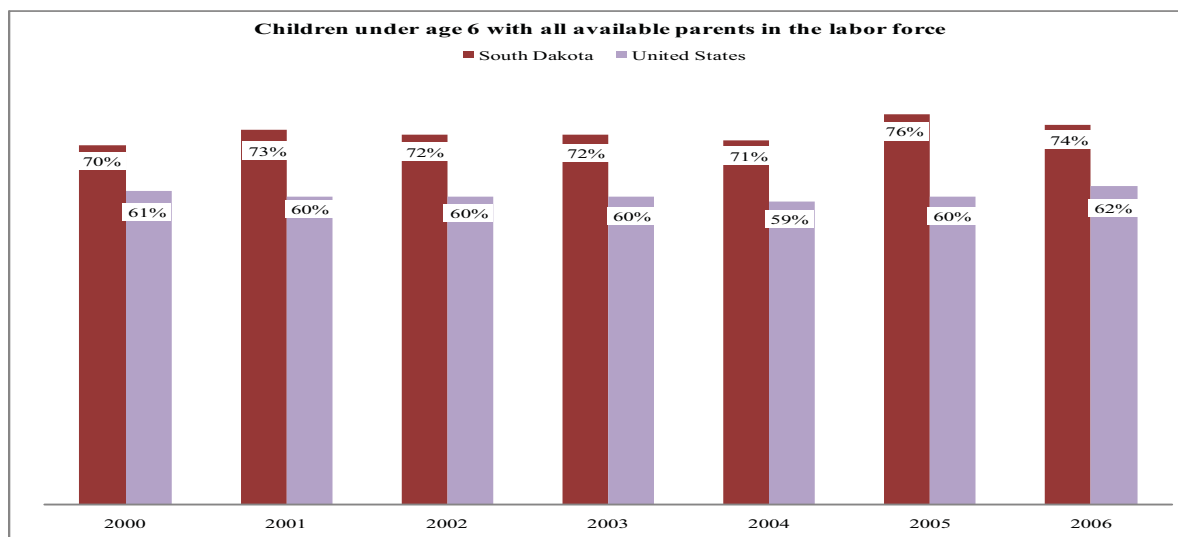
showed that the average child spent 27 hours a week in care over the first 4½ years of life. During the first two years of life, most family child care took place in the homes of relatives or in family child care homes; as children got older, more were in center-based care³.

The reality of children under age six in non-maternal care is evident in South Dakota. According to the most recent data from the U. S. Census Bureau in 2006, South Dakota ranked first in the percentage of children under age six with parents in the labor force. South Dakota had 74% (approximately 45,000 children) as compared to the national average of 62% of children under age six with parents in the labor force.

The chart below shows the percentages for South Dakota and the nation for children under age six with parents in the labor force. The ranking for South Dakota by year is as follows.

Year	Rank
2000	2 nd
2001	1 st
2002	1 st
2003	3 rd
2004	3 rd
2005	1 st
2006	1 st

Retrieved from KIDS COUNT Data Center, www.kidscount.org/datacenter/ on April 4, 2008.



Data Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, 2001 Supplementary Survey, 2002 through 2006 American Community Survey. Accessed on-line from the KIDS COUNT Data Center <http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/> on April 4, 2008.

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With so many infants and toddlers spending time each day in a child care environment, the quality of that care becomes a community issue. The environment must be a place where the child can thrive. Young children need a schedule that is responsive to their needs, with appropriate stimulation and time to rest. They need to be talked to and played with. They need love and attention. And they need the opportunity to form a comfortable, secure relationship with a caregiver who will nurture their healthy emotional development⁴.

Researchers have found that children enrolled in high-quality early care and education programs show improved school readiness and school achievement. Children attending high-quality programs are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school or need special education⁵.

Striking differences in vocabulary become apparent during a child's early years. A national study* found that an average four-year old in a family receiving welfare assistance has heard about 13 million spoken words, while a child from a working class family has heard about 26 million, and a child from a professional family almost 45 million. Participation in high-quality child care and early learning programs can help to close these gaps in school readiness⁵.

*Olson, L. (2007, January 4). Paying attention early on. *Education Week Quality Counts 2007*, 26(17), pp 29-31.

Key Program Elements of Quality Care^{5,6}

Common elements of effective early child care and education



programs, which have a significant impact on the expected outcomes for young children include:

•**Warm, responsive interactions between staff and children.**

Frequent and positive interactions between staff and children is strongly

and consistently associated with good developmental outcomes for children. Programs that reflect the cultures and diversity of the children they serve and intentionally address the strengths and needs of children with disabilities support healthy child development.

•**A language-rich environment.** Staff who ask questions, tell stories, sing songs, read books, use descriptive words when talking about objects and events, and consistently respond to what children say and ask are delivering high-quality programming that helps children learn.

•**Relationships & activities.** A consistent, loving care environment has a significant impact on children. Continuity of child relationships with adults, emphasis on child-initiated activities, child participation in representational play, and positive relationships between parents and staff are consistently associated with positive outcomes for children.

- Age-appropriate curricula and stimulating materials in a safe physical setting.** Programs that help teachers implement intentional, content-driven curricula that is engaging and fun for young children strengthen children's early literacy and math skills. The curricula must create a safe, affirming learning environment that respects and recognizes the individuality of each child, including the key role of a child's culture and language to their social-emotional development.
- Child:staff ratio & group size.** Lower child to staff ratios and smaller group sizes are associated with improved quality in child care in a number of studies. Particular emphasis has been placed on the importance of these features for the youngest children in care—infants and toddlers.
- Staff education & specific training in child-related fields.** Studies have shown that both years of schooling and specific training in child-related fields affect the quality of programs.
- Compensation & staff turnover.** Staff turnover rates are high in child care—roughly three times the rates of school teachers. Turnover is closely associated with compensation, which is dramatically low in the United States.
- Director competency.** The performance of the program director, particularly as it relates to providing leadership in program functioning at the administrative level and providing high quality supervision and feedback, predicts program quality.
- Safe and sanitary design and maintenance of the physical environment, and hygienic practices.** One of the most important types of protection supported by regulation is the assurance of safe and hygienic facilities and practices.

Teacher Qualifications, Program Cost, & Quality⁵

Early care and education is expensive, regardless of its quality. Early childhood programs have high labor costs because young children's safety and well-being require that relatively small numbers of children be assigned to each staff member. Improving staff-child ratios, lowering group size and hiring more qualified staff have a direct impact on program budgets. Thus, high-quality early childhood programs require investment.

Low wages lead to high rates of staff turnover. Nationally, teacher turnover in child care programs is two to three times higher than in grades K-12. It will be critical to develop investments and strategies that create access to higher education for adult students and pathways for advancement for early childhood teachers already in the field.

To help with advancement, South Dakota developed Pathways to Professional Development. The project is designed for child-care providers, educators, trainers, directors, administrators and advocates of children—those with entry-level education or advanced degrees.

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The goal of the Pathways project is to support those who actively pursue ongoing educational opportunities and professional commitments. The project also supports development of a network of qualified trainers who are committed to providing adult learning experiences that promote quality care for children.

The Career Lattice defines seven levels of professional achievement. Each level includes training, education and experience requirements. It can be used to chart a course for career development and recognition for education and professional achievements. By developing a knowledgeable and skilled work force, the lattice can lead to an increase in the number of quality programs for children in South Dakota.

(See the South Dakota Department of Social Services, Division of Child Care Services website: <http://dss.sd.gov/childcare/pathwaystopd/> for additional information).

Building a Quality Early Care and Education System⁵

Building a quality early care and education system requires federal and state investments. This investment ensures access to high-quality child care for working families and supports enrollment of young children in high-quality early education programs within child care, such as Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs. It is critical that child care and early learning programs meet research-based quality standards to deliver long-lasting positive outcomes for children.

States across the country are establishing publicly funded pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year-olds to improve school readiness, particularly for low-income children. It is important that new investments in pre-kindergarten programs be designed to meet the needs of working families and be integrated with the existing child care infrastructure. The child-care system requires additional resources in order to achieve the high quality standards necessary to achieve early education goals.

A recent national report⁺ outlined the following infrastructure components as vital for a high-quality, coordinated early care and education system:

- **Early learning guidelines** that define desired outcomes for young children and **program quality standards** that support positive outcomes for children.
- A program **Quality Rating and Improvement System** that encourages quality improvement and recognizes and rewards programs delivering higher quality early education.

⁺ National Early Childhood Accountability Task Force (2007). Taking stock: Assessing and improving early childhood learning and program quality. Philadelphia, PA: The Pew Charitable Trusts.

- A **high-quality professional development system** that expands access to formal higher education, ensures the quality of training through a training approval process, provides incentives for training, and tracks the cumulative training and education of professionals.

- A **common data management and reporting system** that contains information on children, program quality and the early childhood workforce.

State Investments in Child Care & Early Education

“Young children have approximately 1,825 days between birth and the day they arrive in kindergarten⁷. Fully 85 percent of core brain structure is formed by the time children enter kindergarten. “Science confirms that this period is critical in forming the foundation of emotionally healthy, creative, resourceful, intellectually curious, socially connected, entrepreneurial members of society⁷.”



The following, excerpted from [Increasing State Investments in Early Care and Education: Lessons Learned from Advocates and Best Practices²](#), illustrate how some states have created new public investments in early care and education.

- **Wyoming** - \$6 million to expand childcare subsidies (particularly for infants and toddlers), scholarships for early care and education professionals to pursue degrees or Child Development Associate certifications, technical assistance for director on business planning and management, education for parents on the early years, quality improvement technical assistance and family strengthening programs.
- **Washington** - \$184.2 million to expand and improve child-care subsidies, pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten and family support and home visitation programs; pilot a quality rating and improvement system; and invest in a variety of infrastructure elements (child-care resource and referral, career ladder, child-care consultation, apprenticeships, and redesigning the early learning benchmarks).
- **New Mexico** - \$12.7 million to expand access to subsidies, pre-k, staff bonuses based on education and longevity, training/technical assistance, and child development grant program.



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The South Dakota KIDS COUNT Project

(www.sdkidscount.org) is a national and state-by-state effort, sponsored by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to track the status of children in the United States. By providing policymakers and citizens with benchmarks of child well-being, KIDS COUNT seeks to enrich local, state, and national discussions concerning ways to secure better futures for children and families. Additional funding for the state project comes from the South Dakota Departments of: Education, Human Services, and Social Services.

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Notes:

- ¹ Reprinted with permission from the National Network for Child Care - NNCC. Boschee, M.A., & Jacobs, G. (1997). Ingredients for quality child care. Internet. National Network for Child Care. (www.nncc.org).
- ² Retrieved from KIDS COUNT Data Center <http://www.kidscount.org/datacenter/> on April 4, 2008.
- ³ National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIH, DHHS. (2006). The NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (SECCYD): Findings for Children up to Age 4 1/2 Years (05-4318). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs_details.cfm?from=&pubs_id=5047
- ⁴ Choosing Quality Child Care, Zero to Three Key Topics. Accessed on-line at <http://www.zerotothree.org/> on April 4, 2008.
- ⁵ Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Issue Brief *Quality Child Care and Early Learning in Rhode Island*, December 2007. Accessed on-line, <http://www.rikidscount.org/> on April 14, 2008
- ⁶ Azer, S., LeMoine, S., Morgan, G., Clifford, R.M., & Crawford, G.M. (2002). Regulation of child care. Early Childhood Research and Policy Briefs, 2(1). Chapel Hill, NC: National Center for Early Development and Learning, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Accessed on-line at <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/NCEDL/PDFs/RegBrief.pdf> on April 14, 2008.
- ⁷ Voices for America's Children (2008) [Increasing State Investments in Early Care and Education: Lessons Learned from Advocates and Best Practices](#). Washington DC: Author.