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Parents' Perceptions of  
Child Care in the United States

NACCRRRA's National Parent Poll  
November 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Child care is an under-appreciated feature in the infrastructure that supports the American economic system. Each week, about 11.3 million children under age 5 spend some time in a child care setting (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). For many families, parents need to work to provide basic needs for their families, and child care is an economic necessity. Other families have more options, and child care is a choice that meets the families' needs and values. Unfortunately, the hard choice for all these families is often between safe, reliable high-quality child care that they cannot afford and child care they can afford that is barely adequate.

In November 2008, NACCRRRA commissioned Zogby International to conduct a nationwide telephone survey of 1,004 parents with children under age 6. The survey recorded information about parents' child care arrangements for their youngest child. Parents were asked about the factor that was most important in their child care decision and their biggest concern about child care. The poll surveyed parents on their perceptions about child care issues, including provider training, inspections of programs, requirements for licensing, and background checks. Parents were also asked about their attitudes toward public funding to increase the quality and affordability of child care.

Key Findings

Child care arrangements for the youngest child:

- About half the parents (49 percent) said their youngest child was regularly cared for by someone other than themselves.
- Almost one-fourth (23 percent) reported alternating work schedules to accommodate child care needs.
- A third of parents (33 percent) were using multiple child care arrangements.
- Many of the children were in formal child care arrangements. Almost half of the children (49 percent) were in a child care center or full-day preschool. Over one-third (34 percent) were in a nursery school or part-day preschool, and 16 percent were in family child care.
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- Another 19 percent were at a relative's home, and 11 percent were at a friend or

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neighbor's home.

- Fewer children were cared for in their own home, either by a relative (12 percent), a nanny (7 percent) or a friend or neighbor (5 percent).  
Most important factor in choosing child care:

- A safe environment was the most important factor in choosing child care for 36 percent of the parents.

- A learning environment and learning activities was the most important factor for 17 percent of the parents. In addition, 9 percent said the most important factor was having child care providers trained in child development.

- Cost was the primary factor in choosing child care after a safe environment and a learning environment.  
Single biggest concern about child care:

- Quality was the biggest concern for 40 percent of parents. More than six in 10 (63 percent) were willing to pay an extra \$10 per year in taxes to improve child care quality, and 54 percent were willing to pay \$50 per year extra in taxes.

- Affordability of child care was the biggest concern for 22 percent of parents. Almost one-third of families (32 percent) earning less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line listed cost as their primary concern. Almost three-quarters of parents (74 percent) favored providing public funding to make child care more affordable. In addition, 70 percent were willing to pay an extra \$10 per year in taxes to make child care more affordable, and 60 percent were willing to pay \$50 per year extra in taxes.  
Paying for child care:

- Parents were using multiple resources to help pay for child care: 11 percent received help from family members, 10 percent received public assistance and 7 percent received private assistance.

- A majority of parents (60 percent) agreed that parents should not have sole responsibility for paying for early childhood education.  
Parents' impressions about safety and quality in child care:

Parents made the logical conclusion that governmental oversight was in place to support the safety of their children:

- 87 percent of parents thought all providers were trained to recognize signs of child abuse.

- 85 percent of parents thought all providers were trained in first-aid and CPR.

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84 percent of parents believed all child care providers must have a background check.

81 percent of parents believed that state government licensed all child care programs.

76 percent of parents believed that government inspected all child care programs. Parents believed that governmental regulations were in place to support quality of care and learning for their children:

96 percent of parents believed all child care providers offered learning opportunities to children.

82 percent believed all providers were trained in guidance and discipline.

78 percent assumed all child care providers had training in child development before working with children.

Unfortunately, the reality is very different from the parents' perceptions. There are no federal standards to govern child care, and there is a wide variation in state licensing regulation. Licensing requirements do not support the safety and quality standards that parents expect, especially in family child care homes.

Support for child care improvement initiatives:

A vast majority of parents (96 percent) agreed that all child care providers should be required to undergo comprehensive background checks, using fingerprints, before they begin working with children.

There was strong support among parents (95 percent) for requiring inspections of child care programs, including family child care homes, BEFORE they begin caring for children. In fact, almost one-third (32 percent) said child care programs should be inspected four times a year.

Ninety-two percent of parents agreed that training for providers should include classes in child development, first aid and CPR, child guidance and discipline, and recognition of the signs of child abuse.

In addition, 93 percent of parents thought existing health and safety standards for child care should be improved.  
Conclusion and Recommendations

Economic reality and solid research on child development should inform decisions made about child care and early learning opportunities. Parents need child care in order to work, and they want their children to be in a learning environment that will help them be ready for school. Parents expect child care that is high-quality, safe, affordable and

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reliable. They are willing to pay extra taxes to support high-quality, affordable care.

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□ Parents logically assume that child care regulations are in place to make child care safe and of high-quality. But, reality falls short of those expectations.

Parents can benefit from comprehensive consumer activities to educate parents about the quality and supply of early childhood programs. States use Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding to help fund local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&RS) to support public awareness to promote early care and education.

The bottom line is that all parents want to be able to provide their children with high-quality early care and learning opportunities whether it is in the parent's home, a family child care home or a center-based setting. It is time to rethink how decisions are made about child care quality and how child care in America is financed in order to make it affordable for all families. NACCRRRA makes the following recommendations to states:

1. Require all paid providers to undergo a complete background check, including fingerprints, prior to working with children.
2. Require inspections prior to the state issuing a license and regular unannounced inspections throughout the year.
3. Require 40 hours of pre-service training and 24 hours of annual training. Training should include child development, guidance and discipline, first-aid/CPR, recognizing child abuse and neglect, and related health and safety issues.
4. Require developmentally-appropriate quality standards.
5. Support local child care resource & referral agencies in their efforts to promote public awareness to advance safe, affordable, high-quality care and early learning opportunities.

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## *Unequal Opportunities for Preschoolers: Differing Standards for Licensed Child Care Centers and State-Funded Prekindergarten Programs*

Over 4.7 million 3- and 4-year-old children spend a portion of their week in center-based programs. Slightly more than 1 million attend state-funded prekindergarten programs. Approximately 820,000 attend Head Start programs. The remaining children attend other center-based child care and early learning programs.

**Young children are receiving unequal experiences depending on the program they attend. This is a direct result of states setting the bar at different levels for different types of programs.** In most states, child care licensing regulations do not provide the impetus for the high-quality, center-based care that state-funded prekindergarten programs mandate. It is short-sighted to ignore the setting where the majority of kids are. **Child care standards should be stronger.**

This report compares state child care center licensing regulations that impact 3- and 4-year-old children in center-based child care and early learning programs with standards for 49 state-funded prekindergarten initiatives in 38 states. It uses the quality standards checklist developed by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) to rate state-funded prekindergarten initiatives. Information about Head Start program standards and Department of Defense (DoD) regulations for military child care is also included for each benchmark.

### Key Findings

Children in state-funded prekindergarten programs were more likely to be in classrooms that met NIEER benchmarks for quality than were children in center-based child care and early learning programs licensed by the states.

The state in which a child lives, as well as the family's income level, determines the child's chances of benefiting from state-funded or federally-funded programs.

Of the following, more state-funded prekindergarten initiative policies met the benchmarks than did state licensing regulations for child care centers.

- **NIEER Benchmark 1:** States should have comprehensive early learning guidelines that are research-based, measurable expectations about what young children should know and be able to do.
- **NIEER Benchmark 2:** Lead teachers in each classroom have a Bachelor's degree.
- **NIEER Benchmark 3:** Lead teachers should have specialized training in early childhood education or a related field.
- **NIEER Benchmark 4:** All assistant teachers should have a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or an equivalent credential.
- **NIEER Benchmark 5:** All teachers have at least 15 hours of annual in-service training.

- **NIEER Benchmark 6:** Maximum class size should be 20 children or fewer.
- **NIEER Benchmark 7:** Staff-Child ratios for 3- and 4-year-old children should be 1:10 or better.
- **NIEER Benchmark 8:** Programs should provide screenings and referrals.

NACCRRA's report highlights the gap between state standards for child care and standards for state-funded prekindergarten. Similarly-aged children are in classroom-based settings, which parents logically assume offer similar opportunities for early childhood development. But the reality is far different. Differing standards for licensed child care centers and state-funded prekindergarten programs result in unequal opportunities for the majority of young children: those who are in child care settings.

#### **NACCRRA Recommends:**

- Improve licensing requirements to ensure that all children receive high-quality child care and early learning opportunities.
- Continue to work toward an integrated system of care and education to support all programs delivered in schools, private child care centers, part-day preschool programs, and family child care settings that serve children from infancy through age 12.
- Tie Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding to greater accountability for the quality of child care and monitoring efforts.

For additional information about data and regulations in individual states, click on the links below. More will be coming soon in the report, *Progress Made, Much More Needed*.

- *State Fact Sheets* has the most recent child care data by state. [http://www.naccrra.org/randd/state\\_by\\_state\\_facts.php](http://www.naccrra.org/randd/state_by_state_facts.php)
- *We Can Do Better* state sheets lists state child care center standards and oversight. [http://www.naccrra.org/policy/recent\\_reports/scorecard.php](http://www.naccrra.org/policy/recent_reports/scorecard.php)
- *Leaving Children to Chance* state sheets list state standards and oversight for family child homes. [http://www.naccrra.org/policy/recent\\_reports/fcc\\_report.php](http://www.naccrra.org/policy/recent_reports/fcc_report.php)

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