

6. Quality Matters

Quality matters. High-quality early learning experiences help children start school ready to succeed, while poor-quality services can actually do harm. This applies to programs providing home visiting and parenting education, family support and strengthening services, health and nutrition services, child care, and pre-school. Moreover, programs are most effective when they are not stand-alone efforts but rather connect the young children and families they serve to other needed supports. High-quality child care helps prevent child abuse and aids in early detection of special health care needs by going beyond providing developmental services to the children in care. Particularly when serving vulnerable children and families, quality includes the ability to effectively identify unmet needs and connect children and families to the services needed to meet those needs. There is no magic bullet—no single program or intervention—that can ensure school readiness, but quality programs addressing young children’s needs in a holistic fashion can make major differences. Children from low-income families, who are the most likely to start school behind their classmates, especially benefit from high-quality child care. Regardless of the ethnic or income group served, quality care requires meeting the diverse needs of infants, toddlers, and pre-kindergarten children.

Research has shown that effective early childhood care and education services have the following nine components (Groark, et al., 2002):

- Well-educated staff, trained and knowledgeable about child development
- Caring staff, able to connect with children and families and build on strengths and who are culturally competent in their work

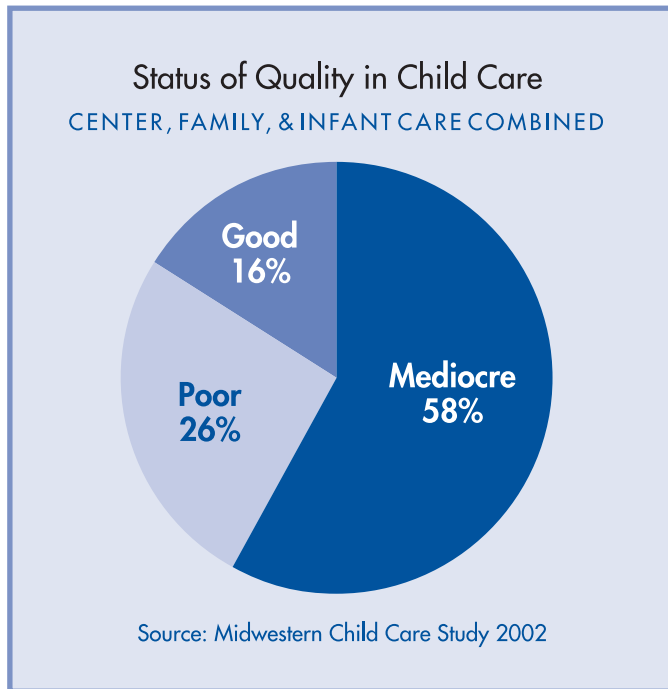
- Consistent staff, able to build relationships and maintain continuity with children and their families, characterized by very low staff turnover
- Supportive and regular supervision of staff, providing continuous training and development
- Clear and reachable goals and objectives regarding growth and development, flexibly applied to address individual strengths and differences
- Adequate staffing to provide the duration and intensity of involvement required to affect development
- A child and family focus, stressing family involvement both within and beyond the specific program
- Comprehensive approaches, ensuring that children’s essential needs are met, either directly or through referral
- Systematic monitoring and evaluation, benchmarking progress to improve practice

Programs that do not incorporate these practices—whether because of limited funding, efforts to serve a broad population, or other reasons—have not shown significant or lasting impacts for the children and families they serve.

While high-quality child care can make a crucial difference in children’s school readiness, studies of child care quality have consistently shown that much care is of only mediocre quality, and that some care is actually unsafe. This applies both to center-based care and to family day care.

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The following chart shows the results of a study in the Midwest of licensed child care centers and registered family day care homes, including centers and homes providing infant care. Less than one-fifth of the care was observed to be of good quality, and over one-fourth was found to be poor. Attention to quality is essential as policy makers work to establish early learning programs and services.



Sources for More Information

Groark, C.J., Mehaffie, K.E., McCall, R.B., Greenberg, M.T., & the Universities Children's Policy Collaborative. (2002). *From science to policy: Research on issues, programs and policies in early care and education*. Prepared for the Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Care and Education. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

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