

What child care professionals want others to know ^[1]

Child care professionals are one of the most historically under-appreciated sectors of the workforce and they need us to hear and take action on their needs.

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Child care professionals are one of the most historically under-appreciated sectors of the workforce and they need us to hear and take action on their needs.

Among the contributing factors to why the essential work of caregiving is not valued as an essential part of infrastructure is the fact that this work is historically done by women, especially women of color. Numerous studies have indicated a wage gap between men and women—a gap that widens further once women of color are considered in compensation analysis. Not only does child care professionals' pay reflect the fact that society does not value their work, but child care professionals shared with me that they feel a lack of appreciation and respect for their profession in our recent study. ^[1]

When considering how to take action and improve the working conditions of child care professionals, one of the most important considerations is how child care professionals themselves would envision this improvement. What would they like? What would they like others to know? Was pay something that they thought should be a top priority? Thus, one of the questions I asked of the child care workers who participated in our study (conducted with child care professionals) was what they wanted others to know about their everyday lives. After analyzing the data, the emergent themes from their interviews indicated that child care professionals want others to know that child care work is:

Rewarding.

All of the child care professionals in the study shared that they truly felt love for children, invested time, made personal sacrifices, and were committed to their work so that children could grow and learn in developmentally-appropriate ways.

"Really child care professionals...love your children. And that's why we do it. And I feel like people need to be grateful that there are people there who will do it even for the low wages and for the little benefits and the sacrifices that they make for their family...there are a lot of people doing a lot of good, wonderful work, and they're doing it for the right reasons." – Grace ^[2], Center Director

Important.

The training and professionalism of child care work is critical to optimal brain development in children. Child care professionals provide (a) meaningful interpersonal interactions; (b) teaching of early math, science, and reading skills (etc.); and (c) life skills (such as not double-dipping a chip—see quote below).

"I had the teacher next door come over to my room one day and she was just kind of downtrodden and was like, "I feel like I didn't do anything today, but like wipe noses and tell kids to stop." And I was like, "Okay, but you had chips and salsa for lunch today or for snack today. Right?" And she's like, "Yes." And I said, "Did you teach your kids not to take a bite of a chip and then put it back into the salsa that everybody was using?" And she was like, "I did. Yeah." And I said, "You tell them something valuable for the rest of their lives." [laughing] You're teaching them, yes, some of the academic says kick in, in threes and fours, but like you're teaching them how to be humans. You're teaching them how to be good citizen[s]. They're learning all of their social skills from 7:00 AM to 6:00 PM with you, social skills that they're not going to exhibit at home because they're not around other children ... parents should be understanding that that's like the most valuable thing their kids not gonna get to college and not know their ABCs, [laughs] but it's gonna be obvious if nobody taught them how to share. If nobody taught them how to get along with other people, if nobody taught them how to use an inside voice, those things become evident a lot sooner... I just wish people saw the benefit of what we're doing rather than thinking we're just playing all day." – Whitney, Teacher and Administrator

Not Respected.

Many child care professionals felt the stigma of child caregiving work, which means they felt that society perceives their work as less important, easy, unskilled, or "just babysitting." They were frequently told that they "did not have a real job" or viewed as "servants."

"I have run into that many times...when people assume you're the grandmother, if you don't tell them otherwise, it's interesting. But if they find out you're the nanny, a lot of them immediately just, you have immediately become a servant...Even though you're not their servant, you're still a servant...That's pretty interesting. I've seen that and I'm not imagining it...It would be like saying I'm the maid... it's just a profession." –Alice, Nanny

Not paying a living wage and not providing benefits.

All of the study caregivers wanted others to know that their colleagues and they were not making a living wage and not provided benefits through their employers in most cases. Several were concerned about the long-term viability of staying in the field they loved and concerned about the quality of future child care professionals due to the low compensation.

"I guess I would have to boil it down in the long term to pay because I feel like nothing will change if the pay doesn't change, as many times people are respected based in the business world, based on how much they're paid, and preschool teachers are at the very bottom. Even though they may be very, very qualified they're still paid a pittance compared to other teachers or other professions." –Jasmine, Teacher

Requiring too much administrative work.

One of the surprising findings of the study was the concern and frustration child care professionals felt because of the amount of administrative work they had to do each day. They felt that the excessive paperwork for the state kept them from doing their important work with children.

"One of the most frustrating things for me is to deal with the state. All...these great ideas they pass, all those mandates we have. And then they're so hard for us to navigate and who's got time or money to do all that? ...Here you are trying to hire somebody to come work for \$11 an hour and you're three to four weeks out before they can even come to work. Well, nobody could go that long without a paycheck. All that paperwork hoopla is a nightmare. And DSS knows it and they're sympathetic and you still can't operate without jumping through the hoops. It's crazy. It's crazy. I called the governor's mansion and talked to 'em about it. But they think that they're making it safer and they're just making it more difficult to be open and it's all they're doing." –Bethie, Center Director

Best practiced when training opportunities are available and accessible.

Several child care professionals shared the importance of training, which provides them with the tools to develop and implement developmentally-appropriate curriculum for children. Equitable access was shared as an obstacle to the necessary child care training.

"You gotta take your classes...I've been to a lot. I've been to some not so good classes. And I've been to some really good classes...so you just gotta [take the classes], even though it's the same. Sometimes you feel like, I've taken these same classes over and over, but you always take away a little bit. And that little bit could be very important. And the fact that it refreshes you. It brings you back... Like, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, that's right. I need to do more of that... I need to do more finger plays. I need to do more nursery rhymes, 'cause nursery rhymes are being forgotten. And just little things. So I think training and the fact that my school pays for my training... and then the being happy, motivating...if I'm not happy, then I can't do my job well." –Sarah, Teacher

Essential.

Child care professionals have watched during the COVID pandemic as schools and other sectors of the workforce deemed "non-essential" were advised to stay at home for their own safety. In South Carolina, child care centers were not required to close, but many did due to factors including safety concerns or declines in enrollment. Essential workers have been left scrambling to make child care arrangements when their primary or usual care fell through. With the decline of child care, interpersonal interactions, and parents needing to balance paid and unpaid work, children and caregivers alike feel burnout during the pandemic. Due to these factors, the pandemic has disproportionately led to women cutting back hours or leaving the workforce, which has an estimated (and projected) cost of \$64.5 billion a year in lost wages and economic activity. Child care professionals are the backbone of our economy, allowing others to get to work and providing support to society in the face of potential danger—especially with the heightened risk of exposure to COVID and reliance on those within their care to be practicing safety precautions. This risk is especially dire because of the lack of living wages and access to health care benefits through their employers. Child care is an economic imperative for children, families, employers, communities, and society.

"Oh, you're putting yourself at risk every day," like the grocery store employees were getting bonuses and all sorts of stuff and like thanks and appreciation. But we remained there throughout the whole thing and we were taking in children every day. So to me it wasn't a big risk in coming home every day. But to the people who do have families at home, they were risking bringing anything home with them every day? We felt very unappreciated during all of that to be honest, because you're already not paying very much. And then the government's like, "Oh, we're going to give money to the people...all this hazard pay." And I'm like, "But we're not qualifying for any of that." It was just kind of another little job at us kind of feeling... COVID has definitely taken a hit on my personal finances...Center Name-Private did not close, not even for one single day, so that was a huge blessing...we have typically about 200 kids and we got down to about 45 for a few months there, but we stayed open. So, I was maintaining...having employment, which was great. But we did put some of our employees on unemployment...we were still going out and putting ourselves at risk and being out in the world with everything was saying, stay home, go home. And we were still going every day and being around children...we had to just trust their parents when they said they're only going home and school, home and school, but we were letting them come in and taking care of them..." –Whitney, Teacher and Administrator

Conclusion

Child care professionals would benefit from our society having a better understanding of the essential and professional work caregivers

bring to their jobs each day. Our children, families, employers, community, and society would benefit from a campaign to (a) help others understand the role of child care work in our daily lives; (b) improve the way child care professionals are treated; and (c) support the child care workforce through better pay, access to benefits, and less administrative work.

“I think a lot of men who run our government have no clue whatsoever what’s going on, and what it takes. And if they would, this is my personal opinion, I’ve said this many times. If they would put half the money that they think they should put in, what a difference it would make in society in 10 years that they would not even believe us. They think we’re making it up.” –Kathryn, Teacher

The time to listen to child care professionals was over five decades ago. Let’s show them that we are listening and taking action today.

[1] McDougald Scott, A. M. (2021). Examining the Everyday Life of Child Care Workers: How Low Wages and the Lack of Benefits Affect Daily Life, Decisions about Employment, and What They Need You to Know (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.

[2] Participant names are pseudonyms to protect privacy.

Region: United States [3]

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