

Reviewing the research base from 1985-2020: Infant and toddler child care and at-risk children's school readiness ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

As the U.S. economy emerges from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, one topic receiving heightened attention is access to non-parental child care for children who are not yet old enough for K-12 schooling (Banghart & Bedrick, 2020; Committee for Economic Development of The Conference Board, 2020). This concern reflects an interrelated set of public policy-relevant issues. Young children need care that benefits their learning and development, particularly in light of research demonstrating the importance of early experiences for their short- and long-term outcomes (Horm et al., 2016; Lally & Mangione, 2017; Marshall, 2011). Public funding for child care can decrease inequality in early learning opportunities (Donoghue & AAP Council on Early Childhood, 2017). Public funding for child care also can provide a critical workforce support for parents (Hatfield et al., 2014; The Council of Economic Advisors, 2019). Yet, child care in the United States is often of low and unequal quality that could exacerbate inequalities (Bassok et al., 2015; Ruzek et al., 2014; Vogel et al., 2011). Policymakers face difficult decisions regarding how much public money to spend on child care, including who should be eligible and the quantity and features of programs believed to indicate quality (Hotz & Wiswall, 2019).

Given these potential tradeoffs, it is useful to understand what constitutes quality, the cost of quality, the effects of quality on child development, and the degree to which child care policies are bringing about their intended goals for improving child development (Almond et al., 2018; Currie & Rossin-Slater, 2016; Duncan & Gibson-Davis, 2006). To address these questions, this report reviews research on infant (ages 0–12 months) and toddler (ages 12–35 months) child care conducted in the U.S. and developed countries since roughly 1985. Of particular interest were studies highlighting the roles subsidized care, child care quality, and different programmatic inputs can play in supporting the school readiness of young children considered to be at-risk for poor developmental outcomes.

The report is organized into five sections. Section 1 provides an overview of how child care quality is conceptualized, as well as the link between high-quality programmatic inputs and a provider's operating costs. Section 2 explores research examining the role infant-toddler child care can play in at-risk children's learning and development. Section 3 turns to research on the relationship between federally funded Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies and infant and toddler child care quality. Section 4 highlights rigorous studies, including randomized trials, that investigated the child development impacts of infant-toddler child care interventions. Finally, Section 5 summarizes key findings and discusses gaps in the research base and implications for a policy-focused infant-toddler child care research agenda. 1. Infant-Toddler Child Care Quality and Related Costs Child care quality can be defined in a variety of ways, but in the U.S. is typically operationalized as a multidimensional construct comprised of structural and process features or inputs. These inputs can be further characterized in terms of meeting professional or organizational standards of quality. In turn, the degree to which a child care provider strives to meet these standards by incorporating particular levels of inputs has implications for both their operating costs and the quality of the experiences offered to infants and toddlers (Allen & Backes, 2018).

Region: International ^[4]

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