

News media coverage of childcare: How U.S. local TV news framed the problem before and during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic ^[1]

Author: Tait, M. E., Bogucki, C., Baum, L., Fowler, E. F., Niederdeppe, J., & Gollust, S. E.

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Abstract

Early care and education (ECE), or the care young children receive before entering formal schooling, can take multiple forms and is delivered in different settings, such as a center, church, or public school. Federal and state governments regularly fund ECE programs and policies through the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act (CCDBG). Many families, however, face significant challenges in access, cost, and quality of ECE programs, and ECE professionals report substantial challenges in the workplace (e.g., inadequate training) and beyond (e.g., low wages). Policies addressing issues related to ECE were proposed in 2021, but stalled on the U.S. federal policy agenda. In this study, we examine the ECE content of local television news coverage both for its representations of and for its potential influences on ECE policy agendas. We use data from local stations affiliated with the major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX) in media markets across the U.S., airing before and during the pandemic. We analyze elements of coverage that could affect public recognition of ECE-related issues, including how problems were framed (e.g., news coverage highlighting scandals or adverse events at ECE facilities) and solutions identified (e.g., public policy). We find that during 2018 and 2019, more coverage highlighted scandalous activity than public policy. The reverse was true, however, during the early period of the pandemic (from mid-March through June of 2020). Researchers and health professionals were seldom included in stories in either sample, and very few stories offered context about the benefits of ECE for health and well-being. These coverage patterns have implications for the public's understanding of ECE policy and the perceived need for reform. Policymakers, advocates, and researchers looking to advance support for ECE should consider ways to use local television news to present health and policy-relevant information to broad segments of the public.

Highlights

- Local tv news coverage related to early care and education (ECE) inconsistently highlighted policy, a potential solution to issues of access, affordability, and quality faced by individuals and families.
- In 2018 and 2019, local tv news coverage of ECE frequently highlighted scandalous and adverse events occurring near or with staff from ECE facilities.
- Such coverage – focused on the individual problems associated with ECE – may lead viewers to question the safety and legitimacy of childcare offerings in their community and limit perceptions of systemic issues.
- During the first stage of the COVID-19 pandemic – March through June of 2020 – local tv news coverage of ECE frequently highlighted the policy response to COVID-19 and related provisions for early care and education.
- Researchers and advocates working to advance ECE-related policy should consider the opportunity to partner with local tv news to build awareness of the need for policy reform.

Region: United States ^[3]

Tags: COVID-19 ^[4]

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