

Children in low-income families are less likely to be in center-based child care ^[1]

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Excerpts from brief

The child care arrangements of children younger than 5 with working mothers vary by income. Children in higher-income families—particularly 3- and 4-year olds—are more likely to be placed in center-based arrangements while low-income children are more likely to be in the care of relatives. These differences may have implications for the school-readiness of low-income children.

These findings are important for two reasons. First, while the quality of each form of care can vary significantly and relative care has certain advantages, there is some evidence that quality center-based arrangements may play an important role in enhancing the skills necessary for a child's successful transition to school. Thus, the disparity between low- and higher-income children in the use of center-based care may represent a missed opportunity to assist low-income children in becoming school-ready.

Second, while it is unclear whether these findings reflect differences between low- and higher-income families in their preferences for care or differences in the constraints upon them, it seems likely that cost is an important factor in shaping the child care choices of low-income families. This hypothesis is supported by the data; relative care, which is often free or inexpensive, is the most common form of non-parental care among low-income children, while the more expensive forms of non-parental care are more prevalent among children in higher-income families. Therefore, it seems important for policymakers to further expand efforts to make the cost of child care less of a barrier so parents can choose the option they consider most appropriate for them and their children.

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