

Children in preschools receive higher-quality care than those in home-based care, study finds ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

New research shows that children in "formal" daycare settings have more educated teachers and are better prepared academically.

Children receiving formal, classroom-based preschool receive significantly higher quality care and have better reading and math skills than their peers who receive informal childcare before kindergarten, according to a new study published this week in *Child Development*.

Currently most young children in the United States experience regular non-parental care — about 50 percent of infants and over 80 percent of four-year-olds. The settings for these experiences vary widely from "formal" classroom settings such as full-day pre-kindergarten, Head Start and private childcare centers to more "informal" settings such as licensed family day care homes, nannies or babysitters. Although more and more children are attending preschool centers, about half of 3- to 5-year-olds experience some informal care on a regular basis.

Relatively little is known about the quality of the informal sector and how it compares with that of preschool centers, which are more highly regulated.

According to researchers from Stanford University, the University of Virginia, Cornell University and the Urban Institute, who used nationally representative data to examine quality differences across formal and informal settings, there are substantial differences not only with respect to quality, but also with respect to children's reading and math skills when they enter kindergarten.

"Our study examined differences across a long list of quality measures," said Daphna Bassok, assistant professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education and associate director of the research center EdPolicyWorks. "We highlight striking differences with respect to teachers' education and training in early childhood."

In formal settings 56 percent of caregivers have a college degree in early childhood education compared with 9 percent of caregivers in the informal settings. Caregivers in the formal sector tend to have about three more years of formal education and are also far more likely to participate in any ongoing training.

"We also found that beyond their credentials, teachers in preschool settings provide a more developmentally stimulating environment," added Bassok, who received her PhD from Stanford Graduate School of Education in 2009. "In many home-based settings children spend non-trivial portions of their day watching television."

For example, while formal caregivers read to children every day, caregivers in informal settings did so less frequently, and the same was true for math activities. In formal settings, caregivers reported that children rarely watched any television, on average less than seven minutes per day. In contrast, informal caregivers reported just under two hours of television watching per day.

"These were pretty striking quality differences across these early childhood settings," said Susanna Loeb, an author of the study and Barnett Family Professor of Education at Stanford University. "But what we really wanted to know was if these large differences in quality impacted children's school readiness."

They found that at age 5, children who attended formal childcare arrangements have substantially stronger reading and math skills relative to similar children who attended informal settings.

"Most interestingly," added Loeb "these reading and math readiness gaps between children in home-based or preschool settings are fully explained by the differences in observed quality. Our findings suggest that these big quality disparities across sectors have meaningful implications for children's development, and that improving the quality of family child care homes, or helping families find higher quality settings could have meaningful implications."

These researchers say that given the widespread use of informal care, policy efforts to improve the quality in early childhood are likely to

have important societal benefits. One option that they suggest to achieve that aim would be to more highly regulate home-based care.

“Many families select informal, home-based settings because preschool slots don’t exist, are too expensive, or lack the flexibility that the family needs,” explained Bassok. “Policies that improve these issues by expanding access to flexible, affordable, formal arrangements may have long-term benefits.”

Providing parents easy to access information about the quality of their child care options may also be helpful.

“Most parents wish to enroll their child in safe, warm and engaging care settings, but they tend to know little about what effective classroom quality is,” said Loeb. “Providing parents with simple information about quality in early childhood settings may lead to changes in their early care choices and to improvements in child outcomes.”

Other authors on this paper include Maria Fitzpatrick, an assistant professor at Cornell, and Erica Greenberg, a research associate at the Urban Institute.

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