

Child care pay lags at bottom of pay scale, as advocates urge higher standards and better training ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

There is an emerging scientific and policy consensus that closing the school achievement gap between rich and poor will require educators and policy makers to focus on the first five years of life. Neuroscience is increasingly demonstrating this has an outsized impact on a child's prospects as an adult.

This is a sizeable challenge. The 2011 U.S. Census Bureau survey reports that over 23 percent of children under five are cared for by organized day care facilities, as opposed to in home care by friends or relatives. And child development experts are increasingly concerned about the quality of care this rising generation receives.

"We know that the greatest period of brain development is in the first three years of life," said Lea Austin, a coauthor of the study, in an interview. "And if we consider the reality that the majority of kids across the country are in child care settings during those years, what happens there is incredibly important."

In pay, training and quality, the study argues, America's child care and early education teachers lag well behind nearly all other professions, argues a new Early Childhood Workforce Index, compiled by the U.C. Berkeley Center for the Study of Child Care Employment.

Austin points to a 2015 report by the Institute of Medicine at the National Academy of Sciences, which she says argues that "working with young children from birth through five years of age is just as important and complex as working with older children, but it requires different, specialized knowledge."

The Berkeley study thus provides more fodder for advocates who argue that training and wages for the early child care and preschool professions should be adjusted upward, given the new consensus on the importance of this phase.

Zero to three

By targeting "birth through five," however, the Berkeley study plays into a frustration expressed by many advocates of improved early child care, namely that conflating "zero to five" in a single group overlooks the emerging urgency of zero to three.

The most critical phase is the first three years, not years four and five, says Katherine Stevens, a research fellow in education policy at the American Enterprise Institute. Grouping the first five years into a single category leads to sloppy thinking and policies, she argues.

"We start by saying that the first three years are critical," Stevens said, "and the next thing you know they are explaining why that means we have to send all 4-year-olds to school."

Stevens points to a recent poll that shows the American public agreeing that birth to five are critical years, and the headline on the poll was that "the American public supports preschool."

"Four is really too late," agrees Katie Hamm, senior director of Child Care Policy at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for American Progress, "but that doesn't mean that four isn't important."

Scale problems

The Early Childhood Workforce Index notes that Kindergarten teachers, who are already at the low end of education pay, average nearly \$25 an hour, compared to under \$14 an hour for preschool teachers and under \$10 an hour for child care workers.

As Katherine Stevens notes, there are "millions of children spending 30 to 50 hours a week in out-of-home care, and we are shooting ourselves in the foot if we leave them in an inadequate environment during their most crucial development phase."

"We are talking about a group of people who are paid less than a parking attendant, and we are asking them to do a pretty big job," said Katie Hamm.

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