

Conclusion and Recommendations

The high cost of child care forces many parents to make difficult decisions. Parents want quality child care for their children. They also know the importance of safe, stable, stimulating environments to support their children's development.²⁷ Unfortunately, safety, health and school readiness come at a cost that many parents cannot afford.

Parents and the High Cost of Child Care: 2011 Update details the economic challenge working American families face in paying for child care. It offers recommendations for states and the federal government to improve the affordability of child care.

Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) throughout the country report that some parents have responded to the current economic climate by moving their children from licensed child care centers or family child care homes to informal, unlicensed settings.

NACCRRA is concerned that this means children may be in settings where providers have no training in health and safety practices, do not engage children in activities promoting school readiness and have not had a background check, potentially leading to children in an unsafe setting.

It is essential that the federal and state governments help families access and afford quality child care so that children's safety and healthy development is not jeopardized.

Working families earning low incomes have very few choices without assistance, but many families earning higher incomes are also struggling with the high cost of child care.

Recent research by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) shows that even 10 years after children have left child care, quality care is still related to higher academic achievement for families of all income levels.

State child care assistance policies under the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) are at times inconsistent with and serve to undermine the goal of achieving school readiness for all children and increasing access to higher quality child care settings for low income children.

The law requires a market rate survey, but does not require a specific level at which subsidy rates should be set. As a result, even though families may receive assistance, they still cannot access quality child care.

It is time for Congress and the states to design a system so that all families, not just wealthy ones, can afford quality child care. In the absence of a more effective way to finance a child care system in this country, children's school readiness (and safety) will be left to chance.

It will be very difficult, if not impossible, to significantly increase the number of low-income children in higher quality child care without some minimum quality requirements in CCDBG. Public funds should not be used to pay for low quality, unsafe care.

States and the federal government can help make child care more affordable for working parents.

NACCRRA recommends the following:

- Require the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to define minimally acceptable quality child care for low-income children.
- Require the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to study the true cost of quality care and to offer recommendations to Congress for financing to support quality options for parents.

► Reauthorize CCDBG and add requirements to improve the quality of care:

- » Require 40 hours of initial training and 24 hours of annual training in key areas such as CPR, first aid, early childhood development, child behavior/discipline and child abuse detection and prevention.
- » Require provider background checks, including fingerprint checks, to ensure that children are safe.
- » Require quarterly inspections to ensure effective oversight.
- » Invest in Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies to:
 - assist providers in becoming licensed and in maintaining compliance with licensing standards; and
 - help parents identify quality settings.

- » Increase the quality set-aside to 12 percent increasing over several years to 25 percent (on par with Head Start).
- » Provide resources to expand the availability of quality child care, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where there is a shortage of licensed care.
- » Reduce barriers that prevent families from easily accessing child care fee assistance.

Parent choice in child care is a national policy objective. But, when parents can only choose among poor quality settings, that's not a real choice.

From the research, it is clear that quality care makes a difference. Now is the time for policymakers to promote quality choices for parents.