

# Universal Access to Good-quality Education and Care of Children From Birth to 5 Years

Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption and Dependent Care

## CHILDREN IN EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS

All families with children need child care at one time or another, and increasingly, parents seek child care so they can work outside of the home. During the past two decades, the proportion of mothers of young children entering the labor force nearly doubled, reaching 68% in 1992, with a concomitant dramatic increase in the number of children younger than 5 years who receive some form of out-of-home child care. Currently, about 80% of children entering school have had regular care in either child care centers (nonresidential settings that provide care and education for any number of children), nursery schools or preschools, their own homes, the homes of relatives, or, most frequently, family day care homes (the homes of the care givers in which care and education are provided for either a small [1 to 6] or large [7 to 12] number of children).<sup>1</sup> The types of child care arrangements and the extent to which they are used vary according to the child's age and the income, education, and employment status of the parents. Older preschool children, children whose mothers have more than high school educations, and children whose families' incomes are higher are more likely to be enrolled in center-based care.<sup>2,3</sup> Unemployed parents also tend to use care in centers rather than care in the child's or another family's home,<sup>1</sup> presumably because subsidized center-based child care programs are available for them. Overall, however, poor families are less likely to make use of preschool programs for their 3- to 4-year-old children than are more affluent families.<sup>4</sup>

## THE NEED FOR GOOD-QUALITY CHILD CARE

The quality of child care and education does not depend on the type of child care arrangement, although there is some evidence that unregulated care in the homes of relatives and neighbors is more often of poor quality than regulated, center-based care.<sup>5</sup> Rather, quality rests on the interactions between the adult care givers and the children and the opportunities for learning provided to the children. In general, good-quality child care is not harmful to chil-

dren and may improve cognitive outcomes significantly for high-risk children whose homes are not likely to provide adequate cognitive stimulation. In early childhood, care and education are inseparable. Commonly, health professionals focus on the control of infection, prevention of injury, and promotion of physical health for children in group care. However, by failing to promote the development and well-being of children, care of inferior quality can have lasting harmful effects on their language and social development and school performance.<sup>5,6</sup>

## RECOGNIZING GOOD-QUALITY EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

It can be difficult for parents to assess the quality of care they have chosen for their children. Child care should be provided in a safe environment, which minimizes the risk of illness and injury and which promotes physical and emotional health. Characteristics of good-quality programs are well described and quantitated in two publications.<sup>7,8</sup> In general, they are characterized by the following<sup>7,8</sup>:

1. Adult care givers who have specialized training or experience in child development;
2. A warm, nurturing, attentive, and developmentally appropriate and stimulating learning environment;
3. Small groups of children with sufficient numbers of consistent, interactive care givers who have long-term relationships with the children in their care; and
4. Good communication between program staff and families and policies that actively involve parents in child care activities and that try to enhance parenting skills.

## CONSTRAINTS ON ACCESS TO GOOD-QUALITY CARE FOR ALL CHILDREN

Reliance on marketplace forces and parental choice has not produced the quality of child care and support systems children and families need and deserve. Good-quality child care is not inexpensive, but it can be a good value. Currently, the quality of early child care and education is constrained by a lack of subsidization by the government or employers. Most parents cannot afford to commit large portions of their income to child care. Therefore, financial support to meet the full cost of good-quality care for all children is not available.

Most positions in child care centers offer low salaries. They also lack employee benefits such as health

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insurance and paid vacations, and because states license child care center teachers who have little or no training and experience, children bear the consequences of poorly qualified care givers and high turnover rates.<sup>9</sup> With a constant flow of new, poorly trained care givers, young children cannot develop trusting relationships with adults, and programs cannot provide good-quality educational experiences.

Parents must balance caring for their children with their other responsibilities—work, family, and community roles—and meeting their own needs as individuals. The financial and personal challenges of balancing these roles cause stress for many parents and limit their ability to choose good-quality child care. Thus, child care is often chosen based on cost and convenience rather than on the level of quality parents might prefer.

Although the majority of Americans think that both the government and employers should play a primary role in assisting working parents with child care, public policy does not provide strong support for high-quality child care. Most policy makers regard child care only as a means to enable parents to work. Few view it as a vehicle for social support, education, and promotion of emotional and physical health for children and families.

#### THE PRACTICE OF PEDIATRICIANS

A recent survey found that most parents are not able to assess the quality of child care accurately.<sup>10</sup> To assist parents, pediatricians ought to be more aware of the impediments to accessing good-quality child care. In a survey by the American Academy of Pediatrics, only 41% of pediatricians reported routinely discussing child care with mothers who planned to work outside the home; 53% reported that they discussed this topic only when asked.<sup>11</sup> Many young parents are uninformed about the issues associated with child care or are too stressed to think or ask about the consequences of their choices of care for their children. Routine child health supervision offers opportunities for pediatricians to assist families with this important decision.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PEDIATRICIANS

The development of affordable, accessible, good-quality child care for families requires the combined efforts of many people—parents, pediatricians, other child advocates, employers, community organizations, and government leaders at all levels. Every community needs a continuum of high-quality child care services that are available to all children from infancy. Pediatricians can contribute to achieving universal access to early care and education in a number of ways.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Pediatricians need to view early childhood educators as potential partners who can help assure that each child receives developmentally appropriate, comprehensive, and continuous care, including linkage with a medical home. Pediatricians can share their expertise with early childhood educators and

program directors to help them develop safe, healthy environments and sound policies. By such collaboration, pediatricians will find many opportunities to promote health and safety, to enhance educational interventions, and to make parent education more effective.

2. Pediatricians, in their interactions with families, child care providers, licensing agencies, and legislators, must promote the expectation for good-quality care that meets national performance standards and individual family needs.

3. Pediatricians need to educate themselves and parents about local licensing practices and national accreditation for child care services so that parents avoid choosing poor-quality child care. In instances in which these consumer protection measures are inadequate, pediatricians can offer to help local authorities improve them. Pediatricians also can share information with parents about resource and referral services that help find good-quality early care and education programs.

4. Child care and education programs and mechanisms for their funding must not segregate families based on socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or special needs. Appropriate adaptive measures should be provided for children with disabilities. Pediatricians can play a significant role in shaping the attitude of the public, employers, and policy makers so they recognize the importance of access to good-quality child care for all families. To achieve universal access for both low- and middle-income families, multiple financial supports should be available, including direct subsidies and tax credits.

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