
Conclusions

The results of the Community Child Care Research Project provide new data describing the child care experiences of low income working families in 4 communities in Indiana. Because the study participants were volunteers rather than randomly selected, and because the research design was correlational rather than experimental, conclusions drawn from these findings necessarily have limitations. The findings cannot be confidently generalized to other low income working families and child care providers, nor can the links between child care quality and children's development be assumed to be causal. For example, while it is quite possible that higher quality child care does support better child development outcomes, it is also plausible that families whose children had more advanced levels of development located and used higher quality child care. Despite these limitations, the research results do represent the recent experiences of more than 300 low income working families, their children, and their child care providers. Therefore, the results suggest a number of key issues that need further investigation by policy makers and researchers.

- 1. Are children from low-income working families at risk for less than optimal development?** Many children in this sample scored lower than established norms in areas of cognitive competence. This is not unusual for children from low income families. The existing research literature suggests that both family and child care experiences influence children's development and school readiness. The significant correlations we found between child care quality and children's abilities, even after controlling for maternal education and children's age, suggest that efforts to improve child care quality could have an impact on children's development. These findings did not vary by community or type of child care, suggesting that efforts to improve child care quality for low income working families be beneficial in all types of child care.
- 2. Is child care obtained by low income working families low quality?** The observed quality levels of all types of child care used by this sample of low income working families in four communities were low. Almost half of the children in this study attended child care that may not provide experiences and environments thought to be important for development. Educating parents about how to select good quality child care is important. However, there also appeared to be limited child care options for families, due to issues of affordability and accessibility of good quality care. Effective child care policies directed at low income working families should take quality, availability, and affordability into account, so that good quality care is a realistic option for all children.
- 3. Is there is a critical need to improve the quality of infant and toddler care for low income working families?** Overall child care quality for infants and toddlers observed in this research was at a minimal level or below in all types of settings in all four communities. Finding and affording good quality infant-toddler care may be especially problematic for young parents with lower education levels and lower wages, because they are least able to afford infant-toddler child care, which is typically more expensive than care for older children.
- 4. Are new efforts are needed to improve the quality licensed family child care?** Even though licensed child care was generally of higher quality than unlicensed care, licensed family child care in this sample was observed to be low in overall quality and low in several aspects of process quality (e.g., caregiver sensitivity; caregiver responsive interactions with children)-- for infant/toddler care. The need for improvement in caregiver-child relationships in licensed family child care should be further investigated.
- 5. Indiana should investigate quality levels in the rapidly growing child care ministries that are currently license exempt.** Registered child care ministries are serving increasing numbers of children in Indiana. While this research observed a small and select sample of children in child care ministries, in general observed quality in these programs was lower than in licensed child care centers or Head Start. These results suggest a more comprehensive look at quality of care in child care ministries is needed, to determine the need for increased regulation to improve quality.



6. **Greater flexibility in child care and employment is needed for low-income working families to accommodate changing work shifts, non-traditional hours, and care for sick children.** Parents as well as child care leaders in this study pointed to the need for affordable and accessible quality child care that provides more flexibility for low income working families, to accommodate challenging work and school schedules, job training, and child illness. Employers should also look at the possibility of increasing support and work schedule flexibility for workers who are parents of young children.
7. **It is important that the strengths and limitations of individual urban communities are recognized and**

incorporated when planning for improvements in child care quality for low-income working families.

Indiana provides a unique context for child care because many child care decisions are made at the county level. Even though many experiences of this sample of low income families were similar across these four communities, there were significant differences in the demographics of families, availability of child care, types of care selected, quality levels of specific types of care, and in the focus of county-level quality improvement initiatives. This suggests there are important individual community strengths and limitations in child care for low income working families, and that future initiatives to improve quality should account for these variations.