

Executive Summary

Children’s earliest experiences can have substantial and long-lasting effects on their development. Early care and education can prepare children for school, but while some preschool and child care programs do an excellent job, others are inadequate and some may even harm healthy development. Why is there so much variation, and how can public initiatives help poor-quality programs improve?

While research has told us a lot about key dimensions of quality—for example the role of stable, well-trained staff—and has delineated major barriers to achieving it, we know little about what influences the variation in quality of services, even among programs that face similar challenges. Why can one program provide high-quality services while another, facing similar constraints, cannot? And how can a low-achieving program start on a path toward high performance? Answering these questions could help us make even more effective use of the billions of dollars the United States spends every year to help parents access early care and education services.

This study begins to address that gap by focusing on child care center directors and analyzing how their decisions and perspectives, and the context within which they work, affect the quality of their programs. Through that work, we considered each program’s financial stability, staffing, and reliance on outside standards and licensing requirements. Ultimately, our goal is to identify what supports quality in some centers, what blocks progress in others, and how public policy can do more to ensure that all children get off to a good start.

Defining Quality

Since directors play a key role in shaping their programs, it is critical to understand how they define quality and how they strive to achieve it. For this study, we interviewed 38 center directors about their program goals, vision, and the factors that support or block their efforts to create high-quality programs. The centers they run serve at least some 3- or 4-year-olds and were chosen from four sites—Jefferson County, AL; Hudson County,

NJ; King County, WA; and San Diego County, CA—that varied by population size, income, and poverty rates.

Most directors we interviewed defined quality in terms of achieving certain outcomes for children. Nearly every director said it was important to prepare children for school, though not all listed it as their primary goal. Directors also said good-quality programs help children acquire certain skills, such as general life skills and independence or cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and language skills. Although they agreed generally on these goals, directors differed greatly in the specific skills they believed play a part in school readiness and in the aspects of their program’s environment they thought contributed to achieving those goals.

Directors also mentioned program characteristics as aspects of good quality. Many described the importance of creating a program where children felt accepted and loved—an environment like home. Others described quality in terms of excellent teaching practices, though they differed in their philosophies on when learning should take place (“all the time” or at specific instruction times), whether teachers should direct or facilitate learning, and what makes a good curriculum. Most directors also brought up their center’s indoor and outdoor space, classroom materials, supplies, equipment, and food and nutrition in their vision of a quality program. Different views on safety, health, homework, enrichment activities, and the ability to address special needs also came up, though less frequently.

Many directors also described particular teacher characteristics, educational attainment, and training as aspects of an ideal program. Some emphasized that a high-quality program supports its teachers. Some described quality as supporting families, encouraging parent involvement, or keeping parents happy. At the same time, many directors expressed frustration at the disparity between parents’ goals and the center’s goals.

What does this tell us? To better grasp how directors differed in their views of quality, we considered their descriptions along a hierarchy of children’s needs. This framework is based on Maslow’s hierarchy of human needs, which states that fundamental needs (e.g., safety, survival) must be met before higher-level needs (e.g., esteem, aesthetics) are addressed. In the same way, some directors were primarily focused on ensuring the children in their care were safe, while others focused more on children’s cognitive and esteem needs.

We also considered where directors’ ideas about quality came from and how they used those beliefs to guide their decisions. Some directors described following their intrinsic beliefs and making decisions based mainly on their instincts and personal experiences. Others were learning more about child development pedagogy to inform their personal experiences. A third group had already integrated new knowledge with their intrinsic beliefs. Later, we connect these program and director development stages to observations in the classroom.

Characteristics with Connections to Quality

In addition to in-person interviews, we collected data through classroom observations, measuring quality with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Revised (ECERS-R). Together, these two measurements give us a picture of the interaction between teachers and children, as well as the materials and activities available in the classroom.

Centers with observed classrooms that were comparatively high quality, according to the CLASS and ECERS-R scores, had certain characteristics in common. Classrooms in centers with directors who focused on children's higher-level needs tended to have higher scores than classrooms with directors who emphasized safety or other basic needs. Also, classrooms with higher scores were more likely to be found in centers with directors whose decisions reflected an integration of their intrinsic beliefs with other learning than in centers with directors who described decision making based primarily on instinct or experience.

We also found that high-scoring classrooms were in centers with relatively less financial strain and that went above and beyond standard licensing requirements. These programs also had high expectations for teachers and emphasized staff wages, benefits, and professional development.

Staffing

Directors agreed that teachers play a key role in child care and education programs, but they differed in how much and what they expected of staff. Directors with high expectations looked for teachers with certain skills, knowledge, and performance in classroom practices and child outcomes. These directors were also more likely to have a high level of confidence in their staff. Other directors' expectations were more basic. They looked for teachers who could keep children safe and who would get along with the director and other staff. These directors often expressed a lack of confidence in their teachers' abilities and motivation.

We generally found that classrooms with the highest observation scores were in centers where directors had high expectations and a high degree of confidence in their staff. Directors with high expectations helped their staff by developing personal relationships with them, providing backup, supporting professional development, and compensating them well. Directors with basic or lower expectations of teachers were less likely to have these supports in place. In some centers, low expectations could be the result of limited resources or limitations in the labor force itself. Some directors felt they could not afford the supports needed to recruit, develop, and retain staff that would meet higher expectations.

Financial Stress

Although money does not guarantee high-quality child care or education, better-quality services often cost more. While classrooms with high observation scores tended to be in centers where directors felt financially comfortable (or pinched but with higher resource levels), not all financially stable programs were among the highest quality classrooms. Money counts, but not for everything. Classrooms with the lowest observed quality were typically in centers with directors who described a lot of financial stress. However, not all centers that appeared to have relatively limited resources had directors who described high levels of financial stress. Some programs with limited resources had directors who described a more moderate level of financial strain, and many of these had classrooms that achieved at least mixed or middle-level observation scores.

Several variables affect financial strain, including demand for child care services (low demand can lead to underenrollment), the size of the program (centers serving more children can take advantage of economy of scale), and access to funding beyond tuition and subsidies (such as free space and other in-kind donations). Also, programs that can charge more for their services or that receive higher payment rates for subsidized children are less likely to feel financially pinched.

A center's financial stability is also related to the director's scope of responsibility for budgeting and financial decisions, as well as his or her approach to setting and collecting fees. Owners also can influence a center's financial situation. Some directors struggled with the expectation that they generate a profit for outside owners who were not directly involved in the day-to-day program operation.

Standards

Mandatory and voluntary standards can help child care centers ensure they are meeting children's developmental needs. Directors differed in which standards they used to guide their operational decisions and how much they relied on those standards.

Most directors were required to meet licensing standards. Some felt licensing standards helped them reach their goals; others rejected the standards as irrelevant, costly, or burdensome. Some directors had mixed reviews on licensing, while others were fairly neutral and many reached for higher standards to guide their decision making. The way directors perceived and responded to licensing or voluntary higher standards was also shaped by the nature and degree of technical assistance available and by either direct or indirect funding requirements.

Centers with the highest classroom observation scores often went above and beyond licensing standards and relied on programmatic guidance from other sources. Classrooms with the lowest scores, however, were in centers that depended heavily on

licensing standards or struggled to meet them. Some looked to external standards, but could not achieve them. In general, centers constrained by their boards of directors, scarce resources, and limited labor supply had directors who aimed for lower standards. Centers with fewer constraints had directors who targeted higher standards.

Policy Implications

Numerous public policies and initiatives support early care and education, but wide variation still exists in quality of care across centers. Knowing more about what influences quality can help policymakers strategically target public funding and initiatives.

In exploring the factors shaping child care quality, we identified two overarching themes running through our findings and their implications. First, many factors are involved in achieving excellent care. Improving quality is not an easy equation, and each program faces unique constraints and barriers. This finding suggests that there may be a number of untapped opportunities for supporting quality in child care and that there is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Also, policies aimed at improving quality need to consider the issues comprehensively rather than focus on a single factor.

We also found that improving quality is a developmental process. Like Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, centers as organizations also have a hierarchy of needs. Centers must first meet their own safety and survival needs (e.g., financial stability) before addressing more complex goals, such as adopting best practices that go beyond licensing requirements. Directors in the lowest quality programs were often struggling to keep their doors open and meet basic licensing standards; setting higher expectations for staff or services was not their most urgent priority.

Based on our findings, we suggest a number of recommendations for policy and practice:

- ***Address multiple factors that influence quality.*** Many initiatives focus on a single issue, but quality arises from a combination of factors. Centers receiving funding through the Abbott Preschool program, in particular, offer strong evidence that comprehensive interventions can be consistently successful across directors with a broad range of backgrounds and skill sets. The Abbott program combines high funding with universal availability (thus high demand), strict standards and extensive technical assistance to address multiple factors related to quality care.
- ***Identify obstacles to quality improvement.*** As we observed, some directors facing underlying obstacles could not take advantage of assistance or incentives to move their programs to the next level. Initiatives to improve quality will be more effective if programs identify and overcome these barriers first.

- ***Tackle resource constraints.*** Our findings suggest it is not just the level of revenue that matters to centers, it is also how effectively directors minimize their financial stress through effective management of revenue and related constraints. Technical assistance providers can help directors improve their financial management skills and identify opportunities to maximize revenue or in-kind resources.
- ***Recognize the role that directors' leadership skills and belief systems play in shaping quality care.*** Our study shows that directors' traits and beliefs about quality influence their decisions. We recommend targeting directors' leadership skills and helping them recognize and confront the weakest aspects of their programs. Also, technical assistance may be enhanced by more emphasis on helping directors integrate their intrinsic beliefs with outside information about good practice.
- ***Help directors establish and improve supports for teachers.*** In our study, programs with the highest observation scores tended to be run by directors with high expectations for staff who allocated resources to support them. Examining and improving initiatives that help directors support teachers can help improve the early childhood labor force. Also, it is important to continue promoting the view of early childhood teachers as professionals.
- ***Build on program standards.*** Most directors we interviewed used standards to guide their decision making. In the view of directors, standards set important minimums, leveled the playing field among programs, and helped directors make decisions and explain those decisions to staff and parents. Thus, building on and improving program standards can help directors enrich their programs. Targeted technical assistance could go beyond enforcing requirements to help centers identify and overcome barriers to meeting standards.

The findings from this research and the related recommendations have implications for various policy efforts. Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are well positioned to address many needs identified in this study. Training, technical assistance, and mentoring programs could be strengthened by the understanding of obstacles centers face in taking advantage of such programs. Funding sources, including vouchers for families and state prekindergarten programs, can benefit from understanding the implications of financial stability on director decision making. Finally, the research points to several areas in which relatively new initiatives—such as those targeting leadership in early care and education and exploring how individual readiness to change affects learning—could help even more child care programs achieve even better things for children and families.