

Executive Summary

Kith and kin child care--care provided by family, friends and neighbors who are legally exempt from regulation--is the most common form of child care for children under five whose parents are working. In the past several years, it has attracted increased attention as concerns about child care's role in preparing children for school have escalated. The quality of the care these caregivers offer to children has become a major issue for policy makers, practitioners and researchers.

What is good care in these settings where the caregivers are neither parents nor professional child care providers? What kinds of measures can be used to assess it? *Doting on Kids*, the Institute for a Child Care Continuum's study of kith and kin caregivers' perceptions of the quality of care they offer to children, explores these questions. It draws on findings from focus group discussions with caregivers across the country about their understanding of the children in their care; their interactions with them; their relationships with parents; and their views on health and safety.

The study points to some positive aspects of quality in kith and kin child care. According to caregivers' reports, the group size and adult-child ratios are low--typically one or two children in care. In addition, many caregivers described following accepted practices to keep children healthy and safe and that they use basic safety equipment. There were also indications of positive caregiver-child interactions--many reports of individual attention and physical affection, support for cognitive and language development, and opportunities for socialization. On the other hand, some findings, particularly those that related to caregivers' unrealistic expectations for children and views on discipline, raise some concerns about children's well-being in these settings.

The findings also indicate some fundamental differences between kith and kin child care and regulated child care provided in centers and family child care homes. Most of these differences are related to the special relationship that exists between the caregivers and the families for whom they provide child care. In kith and kin care, caring for children is only one aspect of a relationship that began before the child care arrangement started and will continue long after it ends. The roles of caregivers and parents are permeable and the boundaries between them fluid. As mothers, sister, friends and neighbors, these caregivers are more than child care providers, or teachers. The parents play different roles as well--sometimes as child care consumer, more often as daughter or close friend.

The study suggests several strategies for programs and practitioners to enhance positive aspects of care and to address areas of concern. In addition, it posits a new view of child care quality based on children's cumulative experience in multiple settings, and proposes measures for assessing kith and kin child care based on elements that are essential in every setting.