

Child Care Inadequate for Vulnerable Young Children

Research has helped us understand that many factors influence the core components of school readiness, says Ann Collins, NCCP's director for Program and Policy Analysis. Children's cognitive and social-emotional development, their physical health, and their eagerness to learn are built on a foundation of good parenting, economically secure families, and early childhood settings that promote children's learning.

And, she emphasizes, child care subsidies—which help make child care affordable for low-income families—hold the potential to support several of these foundational pillars. Subsidies give families more purchasing power for child care, increasing the likelihood that they can pay for higher quality early childhood settings. They also can support parents' employment or their education and training, leading to more economically secure families.

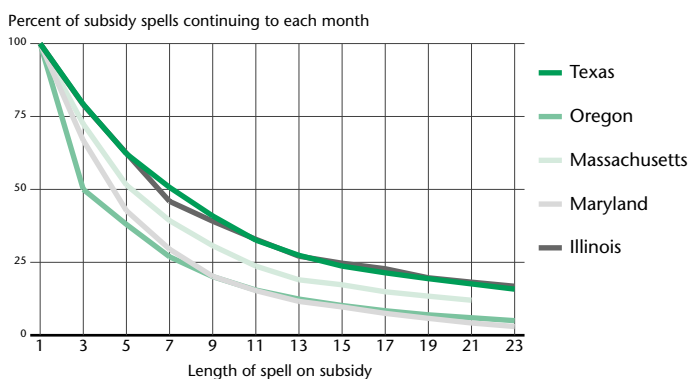
Child Care Subsidies Short

In 1996, as part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, Congress created the Child Care and Development Fund. As a result, public child care spending doubled by 2000. Although many families still wait for child care subsidies in many states, many more families receive them than before.

What do we know about how these child care subsidies have actually influenced school readiness for those families fortunate enough to receive them? According to Ms. Collins, no studies have asked and answered this question in a definitive way. But recent research gives us reason for concern.

One study indicates that families do not have subsidies for long periods of time. In *The Dynamics of Child Care Subsidy Use: A Collaborative Study of Five States*, a multi-state team of researchers that included NCCP suggests that the assistance families receive is not continuous, does not last for a very long period of time, and may be associated with substantial turnover in their children's child care arrangements. The study team found that the average length of subsidy receipt ranged from a low of three months in Or-

Survival Rate—First Observed Spell Starting During Observation Period



The subsidy system as it is today can enhance children's school readiness only at the margins, but it holds the potential to support several foundational pillars [that lead to success in school].

egon to a high of seven months in Texas. There was also considerable reentry; at least one-third of the children were back in the subsidy system within 12 months of leaving it. "These findings do not bode well either for families' economic security or for children's social-emotional development," points out Ms. Collins.

"The study did not identify the reasons for these short periods of subsidies, but it is likely the causes are numerous," she says. Some may relate to administrative difficulties of the subsidy system and others to the lack of work stability in these low-income families' lives. In support of the latter point, at a recent conference, Abt Associates Inc., reporting on a survey of parents completed for the National Study of Child Care for Low-Income Families, said that nearly three-quarters of low-income parents worked nontraditional hours: evenings, nights, weekends, and different hours from week to week. Further, a qualitative study of low-income families leaving welfare for work, conducted by NCCP post-doctoral fellow Ajay Chaudry, documents dramatic work and child care instability in great detail.

Unstable Work Makes Unstable Child Care

The rules governing child care subsidies tie them directly to the hours that families work. If parents' work hours change, in most states the subsidies will adjust to match. If parents go more than 30 days between jobs, most states end their subsidies. "How can a child care setting support children's school readiness if a caregiver sees a child for three days one week, four evenings the next week, and then the child leaves in six months?" asks Ms. Collins. "How can subsidies help parents to be employed if they must constantly negotiate with the subsidy system as their work arrangements change?"

The answers to these questions, she says, lead to the conclusion that, "at best, the subsidy system as it is today can enhance many children's school readiness only at the margins." For many low-income families that desire to have their preschoolers in an early childhood setting on a regular and continuous basis regardless of work hours or jobs—subsidies may not help them get there. "New, creative thinking is needed to make our early childhood systems reflect the realities of low-income families working lives and their desires for their children," she concludes. ■