Executive Summary

In 2012, about one-quarter of American children under age five attended center-based early care and education (ECE) at least five hours per week (NSECE Project Team, 2016). The one million teachers and caregivers working with these children can support children’s social and emotional development and early academic skills through their daily interactions (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil, 2014).

Caring for children is an important task, but can be challenging and exhausting. Research suggests that an ECE workforce that is mentally healthy can provide the best-quality care for children and reduce the likelihood of problem behavior in the classroom (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jeon, Buettner, & Snyder, 2014). While many efforts to improve the quality of ECE have focused on increasing teachers’ and caregivers’ competencies and knowledge specific to the teaching of young children, a small body of research suggests that supporting caregivers’ psychological well-being may also be a worthy goal (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; Jeon, Buettner, & Snyder, 2014).

This report addresses an important next step in this work: understanding the linkages between various workforce supports and teachers’ psychological well-being. For example, do formal supports such as coaching and low child-teacher ratios support psychological well-being in the ECE workforce? Are informal supports, such as the social climate of the child care center, also important for psychological well-being? Figure 1 shows the hypothesized relationships between workforce supports, psychological well-being, and the quality of care.

Figure 1. Hypothesized Relationships among Workforce Supports, ECE Teachers’ Psychological Well-being, and the Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions

This report uses a recent nationally representative survey of the ECE workforce to identify supports to psychological well-being among teachers in center-based ECE programs (NSECE Project Team, 2016). Teachers responded to six items assessing symptoms of nonspecific psychological distress—for example, how often they feel like “everything is an effort.” After accounting for teachers’ background characteristics, we examined whether formal workforce supports (e.g., coaching/mentoring) and informal workforce supports (e.g., feeling respected at work) were associated with ECE teachers’ psychological distress. Our analyses are restricted to teachers and lead teachers in the center-based workforce, so we use the term “teachers” when discussing findings.

Due to data limitations, we focus on the first path of Figure 1—between workforce supports and ECE teachers’ psychological well-being. Workforce supports were measured at the same time as teachers’
psychological well-being. Because teachers were not randomized to receive different workforce supports, we cannot conclude that certain supports caused less distress, but we can conclude that certain associations between workforce supports and psychological well-being exist for the center-based ECE workforce.

**Key Findings**

Fewer than one in ten center-based ECE teachers have moderate psychological distress, and less than one percent have serious distress.

- On a scale from 0–24, the average distress score of teachers in our sample was 2.6.
- ECE teachers were less likely than the general population of adult females to experience serious psychological distress.

Teachers had less psychological distress when they experienced teamwork, respect, and stability at work.

- When we examined several predictors of ECE teachers’ psychological distress simultaneously, teachers with certain demographic characteristics had significantly more distress:
  - Teachers with a high school education or less
  - Asian teachers
  - Teachers with lower household incomes
- Of the formal workforce supports considered (group size/ratio, availability of coaching/mentoring, financial support for professional development, substantive supervision, stable classroom assignments), only stable classroom assignments were significantly associated with lower levels of psychological distress:
  - Teachers who had been moved to another classroom or assigned to a different group of children at least once in the past week had significantly more psychological distress than teachers with more stable work assignments.
- Several informal workforce supports significantly predicted teachers’ psychological distress, even when accounting for teachers’ background characteristics, the program’s funding source, and classroom age group:
  - Teachers who perceived that teamwork was encouraged in their program had significantly less psychological distress than teachers who perceived less encouragement of teamwork.
  - Teachers who felt respected in the child care center had significantly less psychological distress than those who felt less respect.

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2 Teachers with a high school education or less had the highest average levels of psychological distress, but their distress levels were only significantly higher than those of teachers with some college and teachers with an associate degree in a field related to early childhood development.

3 Asian teachers had the most psychological distress. Teachers who identified as Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, White, or Other races had similar levels of psychological distress.

4 Teachers with annual household incomes in the lowest income category ($0–$22,500 per year) had significantly more psychological distress than those with incomes over $45,000.