MISSION: READINESS
COUNCIL FOR A STRONG AMERICA
MISSOURI

REPORT

Child Care and National Security

How greater access to high-quality child care in Missouri can help improve military readiness



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, pastors, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

Mission: Readiness
Retired admirals and generals strengthening national security by ensuring kids stay in school, stay fit, and stay out of trouble

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Our national security depends on qualified young adults who are ready, willing, and able to serve in the U.S. military. However, educational deficits, health issues, and behavior problems currently prevent 71 percent of Missouri youth from qualifying for service.[1]

There is scientific consensus that brain development from birth to age five sets the stage for children's future success. Seventy percent of children under the age of six have both parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and many of these children are not in high-quality child care. Without improvements to the child care system, our nation risks an even smaller recruiting pool in the future.

Early brain development has lifelong impacts

The birth-to-age-5 time frame is the most dramatic period of brain development.[2] During these years, more than one million new neural connections form every second.[3] This early foundation informs children's cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

Several factors can impair healthy brain development in early childhood. For example, without a stable environment and responsive caregivers, infants can experience toxic stress —a prolonged activation of the stress response system (known as "fight or flight") that can lead to long-term deficits.[4] As a result of such negative experiences, differences in cognitive abilities emerge as early as nine months of age.[5]

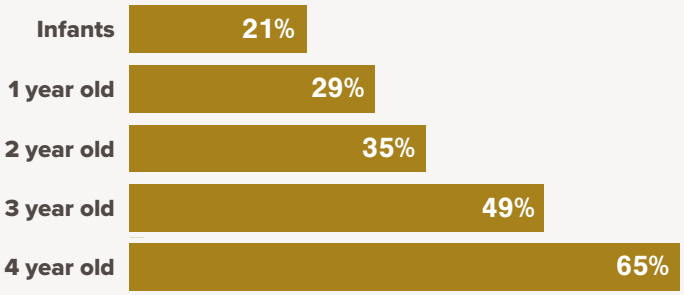
Too many young children are not in high-quality child care

Sixty-five percent of children under the age of 6 in the U.S.—more than 15 million children—have parents or a single parent who works outside the home. In Missouri, 297,000 children under the age of six (70

percent) have all available parents in the workforce. Many of these children are in child care by non-relatives—estimates suggest that 59 percent of Missouri children ages birth to five are in non-parental care for more than 10 hours per week.[7]

At-risk children with access to early care and education

Percent of at-risk children (185 percent of poverty) who can access any publicly-funded early care and education slot:



Source: Child Trends DataBank 2016

However, many families have trouble finding child care, and even when care is available, it is often low quality. There are three main problems with the child care system in Missouri (and nationwide):

- **Access:** In Missouri, 54 percent of all residents live in a child care desert, defined as an area where there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.[8] Typically, availability is especially limited for families who have infants and toddlers, work evening and night shifts, or live in rural areas.[9]
- **Cost:** The average annual price of center-based child care for infants in Missouri ($9,980) is more than the average cost of in-state college tuition ($8,670).[10] The high cost of child care, particularly for infants and toddlers, puts it out of reach for many families, particularly low-income families.
- **Quality:** The quality of child care in Missouri is largely unknown, as the state does not yet have a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). A pilot system, the Quality Assurance Report, is currently being implemented, with preliminary results expected by the end of 2020.[11]

High-quality child care can help improve military readiness

According to Department of Defense data, 71 percent of young Americans between the ages of 17 and 24, and 71 percent of young Missourians, do not qualify for military service.[12] Obesity is one of the leading reasons, barring nearly one-third of young Americans from service. Educational shortcomings, including lack of a high school diploma or failure on the military's entrance exam, disqualify another third.[13] Finally, 10 percent of young adults have a criminal record and 30 percent have a drug abuse record that prevent them from qualifying.[14]

Research shows that high-quality child care can support children's success, and military readiness, in three categories:

1. **Education:** A longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care were better prepared for school at age four compared to children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.[15] Another recent study found that high-quality, full-day child care had a positive impact on children's language development at age two.[16]

   When combined with high-quality preschool, child care can have an even greater impact on academic achievement. For example, a study of North Carolina's Smart Start (child care) and More at Four (preschool)

programs found that children in counties that spent more per child were two months ahead in reading and 1.5 months ahead in math by fifth grade when compared with children in counties that spent less. Further, these results were maintained at least through eighth grade, with both programs leading to increased math and reading test scores and reduced likelihood of repeating a grade since third grade.[18]

2. **Obesity:** Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood are five times as likely to become overweight or obese as adults.[19] Fourteen percent of two- to five-year-olds in the U.S. are obese.[20]

   Child care that emphasizes healthy eating and physical activity can help reduce children's risk of obesity. For example, a study of the Abecedarian early care and education program found that girls who participated were less likely to become obese as adults and boys had fewer risk factors for heart disease, stroke and diabetes.[21]

3. **Behavior:** The aforementioned longitudinal study of more than 1,300 children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared to children in lower-quality child care.[22]

Policymakers should continue to promote access to high-quality child care

The federal government supports child care affordability through the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). CCDBG provides funding to states to subsidize child care expenses for low-income families while parents work or pursue work, or are in school or training.



Learning from Military Child Care

The Department of Defense's child care system, the Military Child Development Program, has been cited by experts as a model for the nation.[23] Across the country and around the world, 200,000 military children are growing and learning in high-quality early care and education programs.[24] These programs are run by the different service branches under requirements set by the Department of Defense. Programs are comprehensive and high quality, focused on children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Nearly 95 percent of the military's child development centers are accredited.[25]

The military offers diverse child care settings:

- Child development centers on military installations
- Centers and family child care homes in civilian settings
- Child care or preschool offered in K-12 schools
- Family child care homes in government housing

There are two military installations in Missouri, both of which offer child development centers and family child care homes.

Through CCDBG, states receive formula-based grants to support both the supply and quality of child care. Unfortunately, subsidies are too low, and are inadequate to meet the market rate for child care in Missouri. As a result, providers are not willing to accept children receiving subsidies.

Additionally, Missouri recently received $33.5 million via the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five to create a more effective, high-quality early learning system in the state.[28] These grants are awarded to states on a competitive basis through the Department of Health and Human Services. [29]

Policy must facilitate high-quality care

To provide benefits to children, child care must be high quality. A basic aspect of quality is safety. We must effectively implement the recently passed "Nathan's Law" that protects the safety of children receiving care in unlicensed, home-based child care settings. Home-based child care teachers might also benefit from a staffed child care network to support them through technical assistance and other services to enhance quality.[30] Missouri should explore piloting such a network.

Another key component of child care quality is a well-qualified workforce. Highly-qualified teachers engage in warm, nurturing interactions with the children, to support their development in all areas, including social-emotional. Excellent teachers also provide developmentally appropriate instruction in key pre-literacy, pre-math and other academic skills.[31] To offer this high-quality experience, Missouri early childhood educators must be well-trained, both before they start teaching and once they are on the job through ongoing professional development.[32] Adequate compensation is also key to attract and retain top talent.[33] This will necessitate increases in subsidy reimbursements for Missouri providers.

Missouri must effectively pilot the Quality Assurance Report to ensure continuous quality improvement and to provide families with information about quality, so they can make informed choices for their children's care. By implementing this system and other efforts recommended by the Governor's Child Care Working Group, Missouri will better meet the needs of our young children and put them on the path to successful careers, including military service if they so choose.

Finally, achieving quality early childhood education requires resources. Child care subsidies must be increased to give providers the resources they need to offer quality care. Recent federal investment will assist with these efforts, but it isn't enough. Missouri must continue to find ways of exploring how to support, expand, and encourage those in the early childhood workforce to make certain that passionate, qualified educators ensure our children are kindergarten-ready academically, socially, and emotionally.

Conclusion

Given the long-term benefits of high-quality child care to children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, Missouri and federal policymakers should continue to promote quality, access, and affordability. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future national security.

Endnotes

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