



Child Care and National Security

How greater access to high-quality child care in Illinois
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 citizen-ready.

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 70 percent of Illinois youth from qualifying for service.¹

There is scientific consensus that brain development from birth to age 5 sets the stage for children’s future success. Seven out of 10 children from birth to age 5 in Illinois have 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 for military service 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 1 million new neural connections form every second.³ This early foundation informs children’s cognition, health, and behavior throughout life.

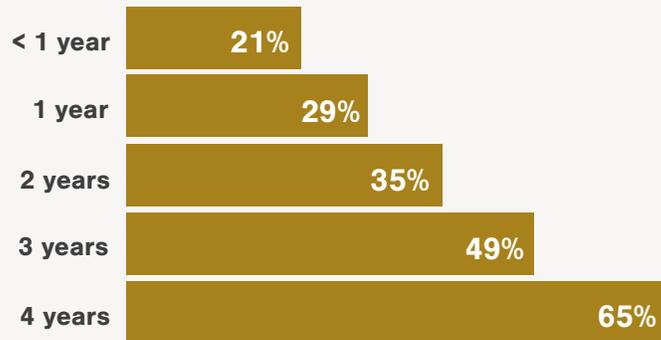
Several factors can impair healthy brain development in early childhood. Without a stable environment and responsive caregivers, infants can experience toxic stress—a prolonged activation of the stress response system (known as “fight or flight”) that can lead to long-term deficits.⁴ Visual, hearing, and sensory-motor problems can also impair brain development when left unaddressed.⁵

As a result of such negative experiences, differences in cognitive abilities emerge as early as nine months of age.⁶ By age 3, children of different backgrounds have varying commands of language. A landmark study on this topic found that 3-year-old children with parents receiving public assistance had vocabularies that

were half that of children with professional parents (525 vs. 1,116 words).⁷

Young children in child care by a non-relative

Percent of young children, ages birth to 4, who are in child care by a non-relative



Source: Child Trends DataBank, 2016

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

Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of children age birth to 5 in the U.S.—nearly 15 million children—have parents or a single parent who works outside the home. In Illinois, this figure is 70 percent, or 627,000 children with all available parents in the workforce.⁸ Many of these children are in child care by non-relatives.⁹

However, many families have trouble finding child care, and even when care is available, it is often lower quality than desired. There are three main problems with the U.S. child care system:

- **Access:** Nearly one-third of parents (32 percent) report having difficulty finding child care.¹⁰ There is also limited availability for families who work evening and night shifts or live in rural areas.¹¹

- **Cost:** The average annual cost of center-based care for infants in Illinois (\$13,176) is more than the average annual cost of in-state college tuition (\$13,621).¹² This high cost puts child care out of reach for many families, particularly low-income families. Only one-quarter of Illinois children aged 5 and under, at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, receive state child care assistance.¹³
- **Quality:** Nationwide, 19 percent of children in families receiving child care subsidies are not in licensed child care programs (a minimum bar for safety), and 89 percent of children are not in accredited child care programs (an indication of quality).¹⁴ In Illinois, 14 percent of child care centers are accredited, as are 3 percent of family child care homes.¹⁵

High-quality child care can help improve military readiness

Much as individual families face difficulties, our country faces significant challenges—including our most core concerns relating to national security. According to Department of Defense data, 71 percent of all young Americans (and 70 percent of Illinoisans) between the ages of 17 and 24 do not qualify for military service.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Finally, 10 percent of young adults have a criminal record and 30 percent have a drug abuse record that prevent them from qualifying.¹⁸

Research shows that high-quality child care can support children's success, and our nation's 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 4 compared with children in lower-quality child care. At age 15, they were still performing slightly above their peers.¹⁹ Another recent study found that high-quality, full-day child care had a positive impact on children’s language development at age 2.²⁰

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.²¹

Obesity: Obesity risk is shaped in the early years of life. Children who are overweight or obese in early childhood (which is the case for 23 percent of 2- to 5-year-old children in the U.S.)²² are four times more likely to become overweight or obese adults.²³ 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.²⁴ Meanwhile, two randomized studies of nutrition programs in Head Start centers in Chicago found that participating children had a lower risk of obesity two years later.²⁵

2. **Behavior:** The aforementioned, longitudinal study of more than 1,300



Learning from Military Child Care

The U.S. Department of Defense’s child care system, the Military Child Development Program, has been cited by experts as a model for the nation.²⁷ **Across the country and around the world, 200,000 children of servicemen and -women are growing and learning in high-quality early care and education programs.**²⁸

Six of Illinois’ nine military installations offer child development centers and family child care homes, or assistance with locating quality child care off post.²⁹ 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.³⁰

The military offers diverse child care settings:

44%

Child development centers on military installations

14%

Family child care homes in government housing

21%

Centers and family child care homes in civilian settings

21%

Child care or preschool offered in K-12 schools³¹

children found that children in higher-quality child care had significantly lower levels of behavior problems at age 15 compared with children in lower-quality child care.²⁶

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

Both the federal government and the state of Illinois assist families in paying for child care expenses. The federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (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. Through CCDBG, states receive formula-based grants to support both the supply and quality of child care. When CCDBG was reauthorized in 2014, new provisions included requirements for states to encourage quality improvement among participating child care providers, as well as standards for state oversight of basic health and safety measures.

Like CCDBG, the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) provides partial subsidies to help low-income families at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level pay for child care. CCAP spent over \$900 million in 2017, and 36 percent of those funds (\$323 million) were state general revenue.

In June of 2017, CCAP provided assistance to 127,000 children, with 59 percent of these children 5 years old or younger. Since most Head Start and pre-kindergarten programs are only part-day programs, CCAP plays a key role in supplementing necessary child care. For school-age kids through age 12, it is the principal source of support for after-school care. CCAP is still recovering from two years of reduced eligibility. Although these cuts were recently restored, CCAP serves about 30,000 fewer participants than it did in June of 2015.³²

ExceleRate: One option for increasing quality

To recognize the importance of quality in early childhood care, Illinois worked with providers to develop ExceleRate in 2013. ExceleRate recognizes early childhood programs that meet high quality standards, and encourages continuous improvements. These standards measure intellectual, physical, social and emotional development for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, and allow early learning professionals to increase their skills.

ExceleRate uses a tiered ratings system. Depending on the level of improvement achieved, ExceleRate awards bronze, silver, or gold “circle of quality” recognition. Among Illinois’ licensed child care centers, 481 achieved gold status, 379 attained silver, and 134 reached bronze as of September 2017.³³

Conclusion

Given the long-term benefits of high-quality child care to children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development, state and federal policymakers should continue to promote quality, access and affordability. Two-thirds of children under the age of 6 in the U.S., and 70 percent of young children in Illinois, have parents or a single parent who works outside the home, and many of these children are not in high-quality child care. Support for high-quality child care is an investment in our future national security.

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