

The Future of Child Care and the Early Childhood Workforce

You are part of an important, exciting, and fast changing field

As an employee in early care and education it is important to recognize the importance of your job, the evolution of our field, the changes that are expected, the expectations for the workforce, and the opportunities to further develop as a professional.

Your job is critical

As an early care and education teacher you are responsible for the safety, health, and development of the children in your care. There is no more important occupation. Early childhood educators, literally hold the future in our hands. Children, their parents and families, our schools and communities - this very nation - depend on us to help prepare the next generation of citizens. Your interactions and instruction prepares children to develop to their full potential and succeed in school and life. While challenging, nothing is more satisfying than teaching children and having your efforts result in a lifelong impact.

Child care is an essential part of the state's infrastructure. Parents trust and rely on child care to allow them to work to provide for their family. Parent and public payments for child care pay for teachers' salaries and center purchases that multiply throughout the economy. Employers know that today's workers need access to accessible and affordable child care. The business community needs the educational system, including early childhood education, to prepare a qualified and competitive workforce for the future. "Without child care, Arizona can't work".

The evolution of early care and education in the United States

During World War II, large numbers of women were needed to work in factories and the first organized approaches to caring for children were developed. After the war, much of the non-parental care for children was considered "baby sitting", something it was believed that almost anyone could do. By the late 60's and increasing with each decade, large numbers of women with young children entered the workforce. The percent of children in families in which the parents are working has increased tremendously and as a result, the use of formal, non-relative out of home care has increased.

As more families relied on "day care", as it was called, parents and the general public began to demand minimum standards. Child care facilities were required to be regulated to ensure a healthy and safe setting for children. Professionals in the field understood the importance of a child focus (as opposed to a "day") now more appropriately use the term "child care", "preschool" or "after school care". Regardless of the term, it is well established that early experiences influence a child's development and that children are learning in child care settings.

Growing recognition of the return of investments in early experiences

As early childhood professionals knew, and science has now confirmed, learning begins at birth, children are always learning, and child care is education. The early years are the most significant for healthy growth and development. Elected officials, business and community leaders, and the general public are increasingly recognizing that child care and pre-kindergarten are part of educational system in this country.

Investments in quality early care and education can have a significant return for society. “For every dollar invested today, savings range from \$2.50 to as much as \$17 in the years ahead” according to the US Chamber of Commerce’s affiliate the Institute for Competitive Workforce. “Numerous studies show that children enrolled in high quality early education programs go on to perform better on cognitive tests in elementary and secondary school, are more likely to graduate from high school, go to college, be employed, and be in good health, and are less likely to become involved with crime or turn to welfare” (National Women’s Law Center).

Greater emphasis on accountability and quality

There are a number of trends impacting both early education teachers and child care centers. “Because the early years of a child’s life form the critical foundation for the child’s life, there is increasing emphasis on accountability. Parents and professionals expect child care programs to be more than safe and nurturing environments. Increasingly, child care programs are expected to be able to demonstrate that children are learning. Higher program standards are being developed and implemented, standardized assessments are being required, children’s gains are being tracked, and teacher performance is being measured. An increasing amount of child care teacher’s performance evaluation is being based on child outcomes.” (The Center for the Child Care Workforce).

Child Care centers are expected to continuously improve the quality of care provided. There are a growing number of programs that offer different types of assistance to child care centers. Many offer direct financial assistance and incentives. Government agencies that provide funding are setting higher standards for health, nutrition, the physical environment, curriculum, and teacher interactions. These trends are expected to continue as more emphasis is placed on demonstrating that children are better prepared for success in school as a result of child care.

Expectations and opportunities for child care professionals.

There is also an overall expectation that during your employment you will continue to develop your knowledge skills, and abilities. Directors and individuals who work directly with children are required to meet and document the minimum licensing requirement of 18 hours of training annually. Certain categories may be required based on your responsibilities. In addition, if your center participates in the EMPOWER program, there are specific topics that must be covered.

There are many opportunities to improve your knowledge and skills through on-site training, community based training and education, community colleges, and universities. Increasingly, these opportunities are more flexible and able to be tailored to your work and personal schedule. As you complete sessions and courses, it is important to track hours and credits and retain credentials and transcripts.

There are a range of positions in child care from entry level to management and many opportunities to advance as a professional and build a career in early childhood education. Your facility Director may identify and provide information on training and educational opportunities.

You may also develop leadership skills and make a difference as a professional by becoming involved and active. Resources and publications on federal and state policy issues are readily available. Taking part in networks helps you stay current and connected with others who share your interests and values. Joining associations allows you to make your voice heard and advocate with others to influence public policy and ultimately improve the lives of children.