

Child Policy Brief



Child Care: Needs of Working Mothers

Issue

Little is known about the trade-offs low-income working mothers face when selecting child care for their children. High-quality child care is expensive, and beyond the reach of most low-income families. We conducted focus groups with mothers on waiting lists for state child care subsidies to learn their preferences and concerns about their current child care arrangements. We asked them whether they plan to change these arrangements if they receive a child care subsidy.

Recommendation

Child care subsidies are likely to have a significant impact on low-income working mothers' ability to achieve independence through education and better jobs. If low-income mothers receive adequate child care assistance, they will use it to place their child in healthier, safer environments that support educational objectives. The amount of the subsidy is an important factor in determining the degree to which mothers would change their children's arrangements. A subsidy representing 75% of a low-income family's child care cost is likely to have a very strong positive impact on that family's future.

Talking with Low-Income Mothers

Two focus groups were held: one in Atlanta and one in Columbus. Participants were randomly recruited from child care subsidy waiting lists provided by local offices of the Department of Children and Family Services. Eight mothers attended from DeKalb and Fulton counties, and 13 mothers attended from Muscogee County, for a total of 21 participants. Participants' children ranged in age from two weeks to 13 years. Eighteen attendees were African-American and three were white. Over half of the mothers worked full- or part-time, nearly 25% attended school and work, or school only, and the remaining mothers were students taking maternity leave. Participants were asked a range of questions regarding their attitudes about and experiences with child care providers. Primary discussion topics were:

- What mothers look for in child care providers, and the definition of "high-quality child care"
- Current child care arrangements, and the impact that these arrangements have on mothers and their children
- Impact that a child care subsidy would have on participants and their families

"Knowing that he is safe when I'm away from him and that he feels comfortable will make my day go well."

Looking for Child Care

Mothers told us that they want their children to be comfortable, safe, secure and stimulated, both mentally and socially, while they are away at work or school. These values clearly equal those of mothers in more advantageous socio-economic situations. Participants spoke of seeking out caregivers who are nurturing, patient, experienced and dedicated, and they highlighted the importance of certification and training.

The Columbus mother who said, "I want my child to go somewhere to learn," summarized the feelings of all participants. These mothers do not want someone to merely babysit their children. Rather, they want a well-planned daily curriculum that provides a variety of learning experiences, entertainment, recreational play and rest periods. Learning to share and playing well with others is viewed as an important aspect of their children's development. They also care about good communication from teachers and value an open-door policy. An Atlanta mother explained, "Sometimes, I will go and sit in the classroom with my child to see how he interacts with the other children, what he's being taught, how the teacher interacts with him and how she disciplines him. That's important to me."

"Why should you pay for something that is not even worth paying for? But we have to utilize it because that's all we have."

Needs of Working Mothers

Experiences with Child Care

Participants in the groups expressed frustration at not being able to afford the care they would like. They reported paying between \$75 and \$170 per child per week for care in a center or family home. In some cases, grandparents assisted in paying for care. Payments to relatives ranged from zero to \$40 per week. The mothers described many bad experiences with current or past child care. The majority of these cases, whether in a child care center, family child care home or with relatives, dealt with a child's injury. One mother remembered, "I went to pick up my son, and he was seven months old, and he had scratches on his face. He was seven months old and scratches on his face! Nobody called to let me know when I was at work."

Another mother said, "When I had my baby, she was born three months early, so she had breathing problems, and they had a little machine that monitored how she breathes. One day (her grandmother) got tired of the machine because every time my baby coughed it would go off. . . So, she took my baby off the machine and my baby stopped breathing. . . They called me home from work to get my baby and take her to the hospital." Other negative experiences involved children left with wet diapers, with dirty faces or hands, and an inability to get in touch with day care owners and teachers to ask about children. As a result of these experiences, participants believe day care centers should be better regulated and monitored for abuses. They would like results of inspections to be better publicized so that parents could have access to information to make decisions about child care.

Equally important, the women told of negative impacts low-cost child care had on their employment and living situations:

- Two women accepted stressful nighttime work schedules so relatives could care for the children while they sleep.
- One participant had to quit her job because day care was too expensive.
- One mother keeps a job she does not like, that does not pay well and offers no advancement because she is able to take her 2-year-old daughter to work with her.
- Many women work irregular hours in less-stable jobs that they schedule around the availability of child care.
- One mother would like to keep her child in day care all day, whereas at present, she can only afford a half day of care and depends on an elderly great-grandmother to keep her daughter in the afternoon.

Mothers told us that they experience a high degree of stress due to worries about current child care arrangements. One mother is deeply concerned because she must leave her children with her wheelchair-bound mother, and she wonders what would happen if her older daughter wandered out of the front yard or the baby were choking. An Atlanta mother worries because her child's day

care center is located at a busy intersection with strangers coming and going all the time. She has heard stories about "crazy things" happening at the apartment complex across the street from the center. A young Columbus mother who relies on her high school day care does not think that the staff could adequately evacuate the children in case of a fire or other emergency. Participants frankly stated that they have visited many centers and homes before making a decision but in most instances could not afford the facility they liked best.

"I would be in school and working (if I received a subsidy) because I would pay the other part. . . Then I could get my degree. It would be a perfect world."

Impact of a Child Care Subsidy

Focus group participants grew animated when discussing how their lives would change if they received a significant subsidy to help pay for child care. The subsidy is seen not only as a means for improving life for their children and themselves, but also as a means of being more independent. For most, it would mean placing their children in a higher-quality day care center that would offer a better environment and educational opportunities. "I could put them in a day care that I like, the one I saw that had the computer room, that had the curriculum I liked and that cared about my child and his well being," said one. Many, especially those with infants who have delayed their return to school, would resume degree programs at college sooner.

Mothers clearly stated that they would not substitute subsidy money for what they are currently paying out of pocket, but would continue paying the same amount and use the subsidy to supplement their day care budget to improve their children's situations. For mothers working nights, the subsidy would enable them to seek day jobs and ultimately provide a more stable home environment. Mothers whose children are cared for by family members said they too would change to a more formal day care setting because they perceived numerous advantages. Most importantly, mothers stated that the subsidy would help them take better care of their children. As one Columbus mother put it, "You don't want to have to depend on other people because that's not their job. This is my child. I know I brought her into the world, and I'm doing what I can to provide for her."

This policy brief was adapted from the article, "Working Mothers Speak: Report on Child Care Focus Groups" by Georgia Health Decisions in conjunction with the Georgia Health Policy Center, August 2001. For more information, read the full report at: www.gsu.edu/~wwwghp/children/Publications/ccfocus.pdf