



Connecting Home Visiting Families to Early Care and Education Services and Resources

Introduction

Parentsⁱ rely on a range of options for their children's early care and education (ECE). Center-based programs include private childcare centers, Head Start, public pre-K, and faith-based programs. Home-based care options include regulated family childcare homes or informal care from relatives, friends, and neighbors. Providers support children's early learning and development and parents' pursuit of education, training, and employment. Yet in many communities, families face barriers to accessing care—particularly regulated ECE programsⁱⁱ—due to limited supply and high costs. Barriers have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Home visitors can help families learn about the complex ECE system, connect them to services, and ease the enrollment process. They can support families in searching for and selecting an ECE provider that meets their needs. This brief summarizes the available research to address the following questions:

- ✔ How does ECE benefit children and families?
- ✔ What challenges do families face accessing ECE programs?
- ✔ How can home visiting better refer and connect families to ECE services?
- ✔ What are the implications for research and practice?

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How Does ECE Benefit Children and Families?

High-quality ECE programs provide many benefits for children's development and well-being. They offer engaging environments, supportive staff, and developmentally appropriate activities that prepare children for kindergarten and beyond (Donoghue, 2017). Participating in high-quality ECE programs also has enduring, positive influences on adult outcomes, such as health, earnings, likelihood of committing a crime, social engagement, and educational attainment (Ackerman & Barnett, 2009; Elango et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2016).

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ECE programs particularly benefit children in families with low incomes (Puma et al., 2010); children who are not native English speakers (Bloom & Weiland, 2015; Espinosa, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2009; Peisner-Feinberg & Schaaf, 2009); and children with disabilities who can access supports and resources they may not receive at home (Fontaine et al., 2007). Among families with low incomes, children who attend ECE programs such as public pre-K and Head Start are better prepared for kindergarten than their peers (Puma et al., 2010). ECE programs support children's English language development and literacy skills by providing frequent exposure to the language and opportunities to engage in conversation with peers and teachers (Bloom & Weiland, 2015; Peisner-Feinberg & Schaff, 2009).

ECE can also play a key role preventing and responding to child abuse and neglect (Karageorge & Kendall, 2008). Childcare providers are well positioned to recognize signs of child abuse and neglect, and are legally required to report suspected cases. Providers can also engage families in activities and share information to promote positive parenting practices.

ECE programs are essential for parents who work and/or pursue education and training. The Mother and Infant Home Visiting Program Evaluation (MIHOPE) found that 80 percent of participating mothers were employed within 3 months of study entry, suggesting a common need for some form of childcare (Duggan et al., 2018). Parents' schedules may be disrupted when ECE access is limited or unstable. They may need to take time off from work or school, switch from full-time to part-time status, or leave altogether.

Recent data from the COVID-19 pandemic show the importance of childcare in supporting adult caregivers' workforce participation. In a 2021 national survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, 30 percent of households with children under age 5 said children were unable to attend childcare because of safety concerns related to the pandemic. Nearly 8 percent of all households had an adult cut their work hours to care for children, while 4.5 percent had an adult quit a job to care for children; 1.6 percent had an adult lose a job because of time away caring for children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

What Challenges Do Families Face Accessing ECE Programs?

Despite the importance of ECE, many families face barriers to access—defined as finding ECE, with reasonable effort, that they can afford, meets parents' needs, and supports children's development (Friese et al., 2017). Key challenges include the following:ⁱⁱⁱ

- ✔ **ECE can be a major household expense, especially for families with low incomes or multiple young children.** The average per-child cost is \$1,230 per month for a center-based ECE program and \$800 per month for home-based care (Workman & Jessen-Howard, 2018). Costs often vary by child age, with costs for infant care much higher than for care of preschool-age children (Whitehurst, 2018). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, childcare should cost no more than 7 percent of a family's income to be affordable. In many states, however, workers spend 30–102 percent of their income on childcare costs (Gould & Cooke, 2015).

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- ✔ **Government assistance for ECE has not met families' needs.** Just 1 in 6 eligible children receives subsidies administered through the federal Child Care and Development Fund (Burgess et al., 2017). Access to childcare subsidies is even more limited for Asian American and Latino families due to reasons such as immigration, language barriers, and rapid population growth (Sethi et al., 2020). When subsidies are available, they are often too small to cover the full cost of care (Jessen-Howard et al., 2020).
- ✔ **Supply is limited in many communities, especially for infants and toddlers.** Many areas across the United States are childcare deserts, in which the number of children needing childcare exceeds the supply of licensed childcare available (Jessen-Howard et al., 2020). Childcare deserts are most prevalent in high-poverty areas. The supply of care for infants and toddlers is typically more limited than care for preschool-age children (Paschall et al., 2021). In such instances, parents face long waitlists or cannot get care for the hours they need (Adams et al., 2021).
- ✔ **Disparities in ECE access persist due to structural racism.** Black and Latino families are more likely to live in childcare deserts because of discriminatory housing policies (Malik et al., 2018). They are also overrepresented among

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many ECE providers to close and negatively impacted programs' financial stability (Weiland et al., 2021). Programs experienced higher costs to meet safety protocols and lower revenue due to decreased enrollment. An estimated 1 out of 8 childcare workers left the field and have not returned (Ewing-Nelson & Vogtman, 2021). Loss of employment disproportionately impacted Black and Latina women, who make up a large segment of the ECE workforce (Sethi et al., 2020).

those in poverty (Creamer, 2020) because of disproportionate access to well-paying jobs and lower pay for the same work. Such factors make childcare harder to find and afford.

- ✔ **ECE program quality varies.** According to one study, only 1 in 4 two-year-olds enrolled in ECE experiences high-quality care based on validated observational measures (Ruzek et al., 2014). Parents can easily get overwhelmed learning which programs are high quality, and then balancing quality with cost, availability, and eligibility. Parents may make ECE decisions after a limited search period (Forry et al., 2013) or enroll in programs that do not meet their family's needs.

How Can Home Visiting Better Refer and Connect Families to ECE Services?

Home visitors offer vital support to families, including referrals to ECE programs and other community resources. Eight evidence-based home visiting models include community linkages and referrals as one of their goals or target outcomes; others encourage referrals more broadly (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Research has shown that families who participate in home visiting services access more community services, on average, than families who do not participate (Lowell et al., 2011).

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Parents rely heavily on personal networks and word-of-mouth advice to make decisions about ECE for their children (Chaudry et al., 2010; Forry et al., 2013). While limited research exists about the direct impact of home visiting on ECE referrals, a few studies have shown that parent participants have their ECE needs met at higher rates than other parents (Lowell et al., 2011). A study by Tufts University researchers found that 62 percent of participants had at least 1 discussion related to ECE services with home visitors; 29 percent had at least 1 discussion that included an ECE referral (Goldberg et al., 2018).

Four types of resources can help home visiting programs better support ECE referrals and connections:

- ✔ ECE consumer education materials
- ✔ State childcare search websites
- ✔ Childcare subsidy programs
- ✔ ECE application assistance

Resource Type 1. ECE Consumer Education Materials

National organizations such as Child Care Aware of America, Zero to Three, and Start Early offer easy-to-read information on ECE. States are required to share [consumer education information](#) on childcare quality, and [local childcare resource and referral agencies](#) (CCR&Rs) can provide individual search support. Home visitors can use these and other resources to inform parents on what [quality childcare looks like](#), possible fits for their child (Child Care Aware & Zero to Three, 2001), and how to get on waiting lists when possible.

Resource Type 2. State Childcare Search Websites

Federal regulations require states to maintain a website where parents can search for licensed childcare providers by zip code. Websites must display profile information for each licensed provider, including contact information and licensing violations. [State quality rating and improvement systems](#) provide an avenue to check the quality of ECE programs.

Resource Type 3. Childcare Subsidy Programs

Limited childcare subsidies are available for parents with low incomes who are engaged in work, school, or approved training activities. Eligible families may include immigrant and refugee parents whose children are U.S. citizens (Ferrette, 2021). Eligibility criteria vary by state and in some cases, by county. The [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#)—combined with earlier pandemic relief packages—allocated nearly \$50 billion to stabilize the childcare market and expand access to childcare subsidies for families affected by the pandemic (Hardy & Gallagher Robbins, 2021). It also provided the largest Child Tax Credit ever to working families—\$3,600 per child under 6 years old and \$3,000 per child aged 6–17 (The White House, 2021).

As of press time, U.S. lawmakers had not decided whether to advance proposed legislation under the Build Back Better framework that would expand eligibility for the childcare subsidy program to reduce costs for more working families. Proposed legislation also provides federal dollars to make high-quality pre-K free to all 3- and 4-year-olds.

Resource Type 4. ECE Application Assistance

A study in Louisiana found that many parents started the process to enroll in public pre-K but stopped when they had to pull documents to prove their eligibility (Weixler et al., 2020). Local support services such as CCR&Rs may guide families through the application process. Some childcare providers also offer support completing subsidy applications. Home visitors can fill in support gaps by working with families to translate materials, providing transportation to apply for services, offering encouragement and emotional support, and checking in on progress and barriers (Goldberg et al., 2018; Weixler et al., 2020).

What Are the Implications for Research and Practice?

Home visitors can serve as families' trusted advisors, educating them on ECE and supporting them in searching for and enrolling in services. Home visiting agencies should coordinate and work closely with local CCR&Rs, childcare subsidy offices, and ECE providers to leverage community resources and supports available to families.

Although a few studies provided evidence of home visiting's effectiveness referring families to ECE and other community supports, more research is needed on the linkage. No studies to date have focused solely on the impact of home visiting services and referrals on access to or participation in ECE programs. Further research could capture home visitors' experiences trying to refer families to services in childcare deserts and the decisions families make regarding care. More stories from families about barriers to accessing ECE are needed to fully understand disparities across local communities.

More information is also needed on home visitors' ECE knowledge, such as available options at different ages and how to find quality care. Home visiting programs could tailor training at the local level to give staff the tools they need to feel prepared. Coordination with local providers can help streamline families' application and enrollment processes. Home visitors may need additional support finding and connecting families to available ECE programs in communities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

ECE is an important community resource that benefits children and parents; however, many families struggle to find high-quality, affordable ECE that meets their needs. ECE supply is limited in many communities, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Home visiting can be an avenue for agencies to partner with families and other community providers to lessen barriers. Home visitors can educate families early on about ECE and their local options; link families to available consumer education resources and online search tools; and support families in completing applications, particularly for the childcare subsidy program. Home visiting programs can leverage available resources to avoid placing undue burden and responsibility on home visitors alone. Local partnerships and service coordination are critical for success.

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Notes

ⁱ We use the term “parent” rather than “primary caregiver” to avoid confusion with childcare providers, who are sometimes also referred to as “caregivers.” We acknowledge that primary caregivers may include adults other than parents.

ⁱⁱ We generally refer to licensed or regulated ECE programs—which can be offered in a center, school, or home setting—instead of unregulated care provided by family, friends, and neighbors. Recognizing that informal caregivers play an important role in families’ lives, we focus our synthesis on the known benefits of formal ECE programs and home visitors’ role connecting families to services and resources.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of these challenges may be offset by recent and pending federal investments in childcare.

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