

Early Care and Education: Foundations for Successful Development



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Early Education Nurtures Brain Development

The early years of life matter because early experiences affect the construction of the maturing brain. As the brain develops, it establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all of the development and behavior that follows. Scientists now know that the interaction of genes and children's experiences shape developing brains. For example, like the process of "serve and return" in games such as volleyball and tennis, infants naturally reach out for interaction through babbling and facial expressions. If adults do not respond by gesturing and vocalizing, the child's learning process is incomplete. This has negative implications for later learning.

Science tells us that cognitive, emotional, and social skills are inextricably intertwined, important components of brain growth.

Because relationships are essential to the development of children's brains, early education and child-care experiences of North Dakota children are important to examine so that we can further strengthen children's opportunities for healthy, productive lives and thereby enhance the economic and social well-being of our state. In addition, giving children positive experiences before they enter school is likely to lead to better outcomes than will remediation programs at a later age - and

will be more cost effective (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). Quality child care is an essential resource for children's brain development. Quality child-care facilities provide stimulating learning environments for children and strive to help children develop cognitively and socially. A minimum standard of care for a child's protection and safety is a facility that is licensed. Licensed child-care facilities must abide by state regulations that specify staff qualifications and child-to-staff ratios, as well as meet health and safety standards. Licensed child care is not readily available in many North Dakota counties. In addition, parents with nontraditional work hours have few options for licensed child care in our state.

Stable relationships, stimulating environments, and opportunities to develop socially help build strong supports in the brain that facilitate future brain development.

Child care is a significant family expense in North Dakota. Ironically, this cost to families contrasts with child-care workers' wages, which are low compared with other workers' wages in our state. One of the ramifications of child-care workers' low incomes is their relatively high job turnover rates. Because children thrive in stable care environments, this trend is not beneficial for our children's successful development.

Quality child care provides essential early childhood educational experiences.



Some Trends in Child Care in North Dakota

CHILD CARE IS A SIGNIFICANT FAMILY EXPENSE

Child care is costly. A single mother earning \$21,259 (the state's median income for single mothers with children in 2007) with a newborn would need to spend an average of 31% of her income to enroll her child in a licensed child-care center. A married couple earning \$68,182 (the state's median income for married couples with children in 2007) with a newborn and a 2 year old in a licensed child-care center spends an average of 19% of their income on child care.

Annual Fees* of Licensed Child Care in North Dakota by Age of Child, 2008

Age of Child	Family/Group Child Care		Child-Care Centers	
	Average Annual Cost	Highest Annual Cost	Average Annual Cost	Highest Annual Cost
Ages 0-11 months	\$5,435	\$6,188	\$6,586	\$7,500
Ages 12-24 months	\$5,402	\$6,053	\$6,547	\$7,500
Age 2	\$5,196	\$6,053	\$6,121	\$7,500
Ages 3-5	\$5,126	\$6,053	\$5,737	\$7,500

*Assuming 50 weeks of child care per year

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CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE HELPS MANY FAMILIES

North Dakota's Child Care Assistance Program helps low-income families with children ages 0-12 (and under age 20 for children who are handicapped or have special needs) to pay for their child-care costs if the parents are working, searching for work, or in school.

Child Care Assistance is not a free program. Almost all parents have to pay part of the cost of child care each month. The Child Care Assistance Program has a sliding scale, which means that families who make more money pay a higher copay for their child care each month in comparison with families who make less money. Once enrolled in allowable child-care facilities, families with the lowest incomes pay 20% of the costs of their child care, whereas families with the highest eligible incomes pay 80% of the costs of their child care.

Number of North Dakota Children Covered by the Child Care Assistance Program, 2000-2007

Year	Number of Program Recipients
2007	8,317
2006	8,587
2005	8,962
2004	10,188
2003	10,542
2002	NA
2001	9,506
2000	9,470

NA = data not available

There are many families in North Dakota who are eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program but are not enrolled. Census data tells us that there were 18,858 children living in families with incomes below poverty and an additional 29,540 children living in low-income families (with incomes above poverty and up to 200% of the poverty level) in 2007.

Many children in low-income and poor families are not enrolled in the Child Care Assistance Program.

Some Trends in North Dakota Head Start Programs

North Dakota Head Start and Early Head Start are programs designed to facilitate the development of poor and low-income children. Some highlights from the 2007-08 program year include:

• **Funding for enrollment.** Funded enrollment for North Dakota Head Start and Early Head Start has remained at 3,353 since 2003. This level of funding is well below the number of eligible children in our state; there were 6,588 children ages 0-4 living in poverty in North Dakota in 2007.

• **Parental employment.** Most parents with children in North Dakota Head Start programs are employed. These families are part of the “working poor.” In 48% of two-parent homes with children in Head Start, both parents were employed in 2007-08; in 42% of these

homes, one parent was employed. Two-thirds (67%) of single parents with children in Head Start programs were employed.

• **Mental health.** In 2007-08, mental health professionals consulted with staff about 1,220 Head Start children, or 31% of all enrollees. In 2003-04, mental health professionals consulted about 516 children, or 14% of Head Start enrollees.

• **Family services.** The vast majority (88%) of all North Dakota Head Start families obtained helpful services during 2007-08. The majority of Head Start families received health (including prenatal) education (68%) and benefited from parenting education services (80%).



REASONS FOR SEEKING NEW CHILD-CARE PROVIDERS

Every year, some North Dakota parents seek out new child-care providers. The reasons parents look for new facilities vary, as noted in the table below.

Reasons North Dakota Parents Sought New Child-Care Provider, 2008

	2008
Beginning a job	2,376
Ending a leave of absence	679
Relocation	568
Child's needs	537
Current child care closing	490
Looking for work	482
Enrolled in school	458
Parent's needs	455
Unhappy with current child-care quality	425
Cost at current child care too high	139
Asked to leave current child care	27

The parents noted in the table above contacted North Dakota Child Care Resource & Referral (<http://www.ndchildcare.org>) for assistance in locating a new program for their child. The most common reason for seeking a new child-care program related to the parent's new employment. The second most common reason related to the end of the parent's leave of absence from work. Parents could indicate more than one reason.

LICENSED FAMILY AND GROUP CHILD CARE DECLINE

North Dakota Child Care Resource & Referral tracks the availability of licensed child care in North Dakota by examining the “capacity” of providers. Capacity is the number of children a provider or group of providers can accommodate in their programs. By the end of 2008, family child-care providers in North Dakota had the capacity to care for 36 fewer children than they did at the beginning of the year. Group child-care providers' capacity declined by 403 children in 2008. In contrast, child-care centers increased their capacity by 502 in 2008.



North Dakota has a variety of licensed child-care programs. Licensed family child care can occur when seven or fewer children are cared for in a provider's own home. Licensed group child care involves 8 to 18 children in a home or other facility. Licensed child care centers care for 19 or more children. Licensed preschools provide part-time educational and socialization experiences for children age 2 years to kindergarten, and licensed school-age programs care for 19 or more school-age children before and/or after school.

The Future of Early Care and Education in North Dakota

In order to secure a bright future for our state and our children, and create an early care and education system in our state that addresses the developmental needs of children and builds on family, school, and community strengths and resources, several ideas are suggested by the data in this report, including:



- **Provide children with more early learning opportunities.** There is convincing research demonstrating that preschool education helps children develop important social and intellectual skills. Children who have early opportunities to learn and succeed are less likely to repeat grades, drop out of school, or need special education.

- **Provide incentives for professional development** to raise the standard of early care and education and guide parents in making informed choices about the level of quality in child-care environments, including Quality Rating Improvement Systems (QRIS). See the North Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children's "Growing Futures Professional Development Plan" at <http://ndaeyc.org/> for further information.

- **Encourage poor and low-income families to apply for Child Care Assistance.** Many families find the costs of child care to be a huge budget burden. The Child Care Assistance Program is designed to help offset some of the costs of child care for poor and low-income families. To locate a free screening device that helps determine whether a family is eligible for this and several other social programs, see the North Dakota Bridge to Benefits site at: <http://nd.bridgetobenefits.org>.

SOURCES USED IN THIS REPORT

North Dakota KIDS COUNT web site. See <http://www.ndkidscount.org> for annual information on North Dakota Head Start and Early Head Start Programs.

American Community Survey (2005-2007). See <http://factfinder.census.gov> for information on median income and children in low-income and poor families.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. See <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu> for information on the science of the developing brain.

North Dakota Child Care Resource & Referral. See <http://www.ndchildcare.org> for information on licensed child-care costs, child-care capacity, and reasons for seeking child-care providers.

North Dakota Department of Human Services. See <http://www.nd.gov/dhs/services/financialhelp/childcare.html> for information on the Child Care Assistance Program.

You can obtain this and all North Dakota KIDS COUNT publications online at no charge. Visit our web site at www.ndkidscount.org.

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