MATHEMATICA
Policy Research

IssueBRIEF

By Jaime Thomas, Kimberly Boller, Cleo Jacobs Johnson, Madeline Young, and Mindy Hu

Setting the Stage:
The Importance of Informal Child Care in California

The strategy

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program strives to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. The goal of CFC's Early Learning Strategy is to make sure infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are on track for success in school and in life by being ready for school by age five, regardless of their family's background. The Early Learning Strategy supports adults who provide nurturing environments where children can enjoy learning, exploring, and making friends, and adults have pride and confidence in the education and care they provide. CFC is focusing part of this 10-year strategy on identifying caregivers who provide informal child care in California, learning about their needs for support, and funding and evaluating promising approaches to enhance the quality of children's experiences in these settings.

This issue brief is the first in a series of three that presents findings from the Informal Caregivers Research Project, funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research. The purpose of this brief is to highlight the importance of informal child care in California and set the stage for the next two briefs. The second brief will present ecomaps and describe informal caregiver and parent networks, focusing on child care arrangements and sources of support and information related to caregiving. The third brief will discuss the needs expressed by informal caregivers and parents, gaps in resources they are able to access, and recommendations for programs and policies to address needs and gaps.

A working definition of informal child care

This research project defines *informal child care* as care provided on a regular basis to children from birth through age 5 by unlicensed, non-custodial caregivers. Other terms for informal child care are family, friend, and neighbor care, home-based care, kith and kin care, relative care, and license-exempt care.[1]

MANY CHILDREN SPEND CRUCIAL DEVELOPMENTAL YEARS IN INFORMAL CARE

Informal child care is the most common form of nonparental child care in the United States.[1] In 2011, 49 percent of the 20.4 million children under 5 in the United States received care in informal settings. Forty-two percent received care from relatives, with grandmothers the most common relative to provide care. Seven percent received informal care from nonrelatives (that is, outside of organized day care facilities and family day care settings). In contrast, about 29 percent of children under 5 received care in formal settings: 24 percent in organized day care facilities and 5 percent from family day care providers.[2] Infants and toddlers are most likely to receive care in informal settings as their only source of nonparental care, compared to preschool-aged and older children.[3]

There is little California-specific research on informal child care, but child care resource and referral (R&R) agency and other staff members we interviewed estimate that its prevalence in the state, the ages of children in informal care, and the characteristics of caregivers are in line with national estimates.

JANUARY 2015

MATHEMATICA-MPR.COM PRINCETON, NJ - ANN ARBOR, MI - CAMBRIDGE, MA - CHICAGO, IL - OAKLAND, CA - WASHINGTON, DC 1

INFORMAL CHILD CARE MEETS THE NEEDS OF LOW-INCOME, WORKING PARENTS

> " There are a lot of families that don't meet the income guidelines for some of the subsidized child care programs, so there is this gap of families who are working families who do not make enough money in the Bay Area to actually pay for quality child care and they tend to be the ones to use the informal care.
>
> County-level key informant

The need for flexible, affordable, and accessible care. Parents value informal care for its flexibility, low cost, and accessibility. Access to informal child care allows parents to work or seek employment or education: mothers who work irregular hours are more likely to select home-based care provided by relatives or others.[4] Families with low incomes are more likely to use informal child care, though families of all socioeconomic groups rely on this type of care.[3] Parents and caregivers in this study cited flexibility of scheduling, lower costs, and the challenges of finding and accessing other types of care as reasons for choosing informal care.

The need for culturally consistent care. Informal child care also allows parents to more easily choose a caregiver with a desired cultural or language background. Parents who prefer cultural consistency between home and early childhood education settings tend to choose informal home-based care, and there is some evidence that families with limited English skills may prefer same-language care in informal settings.[5] Parents and caregivers in this study also cited cultural preference as a reason for choosing informal care.
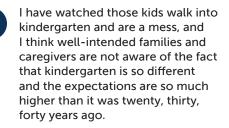
The need for trustworthy caregivers. Another theme that emerged from parent and caregiver interviews is trust: parents feel more comfortable leaving their children with familiar caregivers than with strangers. They especially trust family members. In turn, trusted individuals such as grandparents expressed a desire to help family members with young children.

PARENTS AND OTHERS SHARE CONCERNS ABOUT QUALITY IN INFORMAL CARE

Many factors contribute to the quality of child care provided in any setting. So-called "structural" factors such as cleanliness, safety features, availability of developmentally appropriate materials, and child-to-adult ratios are important, as are "process" factors such as the nature of the caregiver-child relationship and the level of cognitive stimulation. Structural quality of informal care is consistently rated lower than that of regulated family child care, and levels of cognitive stimulation in informal settings have been shown to be low.[6] Mitigating factors include low child-to-adult ratios and warm, supportive caregiver-child interactions.[1]

> " I have watched those kids walk into kindergarten and are a mess, and I think well-intended families and caregivers are not aware of the fact that kindergarten is so different and the expectations are so much higher than it was twenty, thirty, forty years ago.
>
> County-level key informant

Concerns about quality affect parents and institutions. Despite choosing informal child care, several parents mentioned concerns about the safety of this type of care and worries that informal providers do not pay enough attention to the children in their care. A social service organization staff member remarked that a school superintendent in the county was hesitant to invest resources for supporting informal providers in the community because of uncertainty about informal settings, including uncertainty about quality.

PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND STATE AND LOCAL AGENCY STAFF AGREE THAT INFORMAL CAREGIVERS NEED RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

> **"** There just isn't enough funding right now available focusing on informal providers…. Even though some of us might really love to do it, that's not where the money is, so that's not what we're doing. I think that's one of the biggest challenges.
>
> County-level key informant

Caregivers in this study expressed interest in child care resources such as learning materials and information on child development, health and safety, and developmentally appropriate activities for the children in their care. Informal caregivers and R&R staff we interviewed also mentioned that caregivers often feel isolated and need greater access to support networks.

Despite these needs for resources and support, the few programs that exist to provide training and other resources to informal caregivers are susceptible to funding constraints. For example, R&R staff we interviewed in one California county mentioned the Informal Care Training Project (ICTP). Also known as the Growing,

Learning and Caring Project, ICTP was funded primarily by the California Department of Education and delivered by the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network and local R&Rs. ICTP was discontinued in 2010 due to lack of funding. Lack of access to training may lead to a downward spiral, making funding even more difficult to come by since funding agencies are reluctant to support care perceived as low quality. An R&R agency staff member mentioned that state agencies are reluctant to target limited child development resources to informal providers because they are not trained.

The findings presented in this brief highlight the importance of informal care nationally and in California, validating findings from previous research. It is the most common type of nonparental child care, meeting the needs of low-income, working parents by offering the flexibility, low cost, accessibility, cultural consistency, and trustworthiness that parents seek in a caregiver. Though concerns exist about the quality of care provided in informal settings, parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders agree that informal caregivers need resources and support.

> **"** [Informal caregivers] don't feel like they have the right supports or the connections to other people who are doing the same [work].
>
> County-level key informant

ENDNOTES

[1] Susman-Stillman, A., and P. Banghart. "Quality in Family, Friend, and Neighbor Child Care Settings." Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, National Center for Children in Poverty, 2011.

[2] Laughlin, L. "Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Spring 2011." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2013.

[3] Susman-Stillman, A., and P. Banghart. "Demographics of Family, Friend, and Neighbor Child Care in the United States." Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, National Center for Children in Poverty, 2008.

[4] Coley, R.L., E. Votruba-Drzal, M.A. Collins, and P. Miller. "Selection into Early Education and Care Settings: Differences by Developmental Period." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2014, pp. 319–332.

[5] Miller, P., E. Votruba-Drzal, R.L Coley, and A.S. Koury. "Immigrant Families' Use of Early Childcare: Predictors of Care Type." *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2014, pp. 484–498.

[6] Paulsell, D., T. Porter, G. Kirby, K. Boller, E.S. Martin, A. Burwick, and C. Ross. "Supporting Quality in Home-Based Child Care: Initiative Design and Evaluation Options." Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, 2010.

Follow us on: [Facebook] [Twitter] [LinkedIn]

Mathematica® is a registered trademark of Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.

Scan this QR code to visit our website.

3