

Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations

Statement on Child Care/Early Childhood Education

Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it.
Proverbs 22:6

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BACKGROUND

Jewish values and child care. Dedication to education and to children is inherent in Judaism. Children are considered a great blessing (Genesis 22:19) and educating them a rewarding duty. To fulfill this commitment, the Jewish community provides a spectrum of educational opportunities and facilities including child care for young and school age children, pre-schools and kindergarten programs, and after school and family programs aimed at fostering the well-being, education, and growth of children. With these programs we reflect our commitment to "I'dor vador"; that our faith will continue from generation to generation, securing the future and vibrancy of our community.

Jewish community service providers. In the greater Milwaukee area, children under five years of age make up 5.9 percent of the Jewish community. The Jewish community is a major provider of child care and early childhood education services. Through the Milwaukee Jewish Federation, our community provides support to several providers of child care, pre-school, and kindergarten programs: Children's Lubavitch Living and Learning Center, Hillel Academy, the Jewish Community Center, Jewish Family Services, Milwaukee Jewish Day School, and Yeshiva Elementary School. Approximately 300 children are enrolled in Jewish community programs for children ages 0-4. An additional 256 are enrolled in kindergarten programs.

Importance of early brain development: Recent research has confirmed that the first three years of life are critical in determining the development of the child. We have become aware that it is absolutely essential to provide experiences that are structured, predictable, nurturing, and enriched to allow the brain to organize in a healthy way. For a growing number of children, the first three years of life have become a mental wasteland. There is increasing concern that the lack of proper stimulation may be damaging brains. Appropriate early stimulation has a big influence on the youngsters' emotional development, learning skills, and early adaptation to life. Interactions that involve touching, rocking, stroking, talking, reading, singing, listening, and playing are essential for the development of the child.

A growing need. The need for quality child care, early childhood education, and after-school activities is a daily concern for millions of American working parents. Every day, three out of five preschoolers are in child care and millions of older children are in after-school activities while their parents work. In 1999, 54 percent of children from birth through 3rd grade received some form of child care on a regular basis from persons other than their parents. This translates to close to 20 million children and represents an increase from 51 percent in 1995. (U.S. Department on Education).

Based on 1999 census estimates, 6.3 percent of Wisconsin residents are children under 5 years of age, the age group most in need of child care. As of March 2001, 40,896 Wisconsin children (from 23,446 families) enrolled in child care programs receive financial assistance with child care costs through Wisconsin Shares, the State Child Care Subsidy Program. This represents an increase of 39 percent with 2.4 percent in cost subsidy as compared with last year. In the past three years, there has been an increase of 103 percent of children participating in subsidized day care statewide with a 147 percent increase in Milwaukee County. The cost of subsidies has increased 43 percent.

Child care and after-school activities help to shape the way children think, learn, and behave for the rest of their lives, yet little attention is being paid to the quality of those experiences. There is real cause for concern as parents face great difficulty finding good-quality care that they can afford.

In the spirit of *Tikkun Olam, repair of the world*, we promote the principle that all children deserve the chance to achieve their potential through a strong educational foundation. This has been the basis for the efforts by Jewish community organizations to advocate for *all* children to have accessible quality childcare and early childhood education along with support for children with special needs.

Terminology: In this document the terms "child care" and "early childhood education" are used interchangeably. Quality child care and early childhood education go hand in hand and are inextricably linked together. Since every experience in childhood is a learning experience it is essential that this be of high quality in a rich, stimulating environment that is safe, loving, and nurturing. The principles discussed in this position statement relate to a variety of settings including both home and center based childcare, pre-schools, kindergartens, and Head Start programs.

What Are the Issues?

A growing number of American women are in the workforce, resulting in an explosion in the need for child care. More than 50 percent of preschool children are in child care arrangements. Yet families face a continued shortage of safe, high quality, and affordable child care. What's wrong with the current system?

Access to child care: Women are entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. Approximately 72 percent of women with children under 18 and 78 percent with school age children are now in the workforce. Over the next five years, women are expected to account for 60 percent of new labor force entrants. Yet chronic child care shortages continue unabated everywhere.

Affordability: Even if parents are fortunate enough to find satisfactory child care services, they must then confront the hurdle of exceedingly high costs. Regardless of a family's income, child care is the third greatest expense after housing and food for families of 3-5-year-old children, according to the 1998 Census Bureau. Families spend an average of \$4-6,000 annually on child care, and some as much as \$10,000 (David and Lucile Packard Foundation). Of course, the closer a family is to poverty, the greater the financial burden. According to data from the Children's Defense Fund, 43 states are unable to serve all of the low-income children who need care.

Welfare reform has resulted in a record number of low income families in need of quality child care and unable to afford it. In spite of this need, less than 15% of eligible Milwaukee County children are receiving day care assistance for low-income families.

Quality: The ultimate hurdle faced by many working families is the need for quality. Key barriers include the following:

- **Low Pay.** According to Bureau of Labor statistics the average annual salaries of janitors and bartenders are higher than those of child care workers and early childhood teaching assistants. 1998 research reported in the National Child Care Staffing Study found the highest paid teaching assistants in child care centers earned an average of \$12,250, which today is under the poverty level for a family of three. Low pay obviously makes it difficult to recruit skilled workers.
- **High Turnover.** The major consequence of low pay is high turnover. The Center for the Child Care Workforce reported in 1998 that 31 percent of all teaching staff at child care centers leave their jobs every year. By comparison, average turnover nationwide among elementary school teachers is less than 7 percent per year.

- **Limited Education.** Most child care experts say child care providers should have a college education or rigorous training. Yet 40 percent of preschool teachers have only a high school diploma, according to a study by the Carnegie Task Force on Learning. In 1999, 41 states did not require providers to have any child development training. Most states that have created career ladders with increased training have failed to link that training to higher wages. Employees therefore, have little incentive to seek professional development.

Principles for Child Care/Early Childhood Education

The Council's positions on specific proposals for provision and funding of child care and early childhood education will be based on the principles described below. Support for any particular proposal will be considered within the framework of these principles and reflect the degree to which they advance these goals. *Note: These principles were developed by the National Council of Jewish Women as noted in the Acknowledgements on page 4.*

For nearly three decades, parents, educators, and business and community leaders have become increasingly concerned about the lack of quality child care available to most families. Good child care promotes children's well-being and later success in school and is essential for working parents in a growing, productive economy. It is time for us to ensure quality, affordable, accessible child care for all.

- 1. All children deserve quality child care.** Research has shown conclusively that good child care promotes children's well-being and later success in school and in the workplace. A widespread commitment of resources is necessary to ensure that quality care becomes a reality.
- 2. All families deserve affordable child care.** Child care costs are a concern for families of all incomes. Federal, state and local government must commit significant resources to address the child care needs of families.
- 3. More places for children in child care are needed.** Demand for child care has never been greater. Every child in need of child care should be accommodated.
- 4. Child care workers must be paid a livable wage with incentives for professional development.** Studies show that quality child care depends on good, long-term relationships between children and well-trained child care providers. However, many child care workers receive poverty-level wages and have no incentive to further their training. Children will not receive quality care until workers earn a decent wage and receive high-quality training. Compensation must be linked to professional development.
- 5. School-age children must have quality child care options.** FBI data suggest that latchkey children of all income groups are at-risk for truancy, risk-taking behavior and substance abuse. Steps must be taken to develop safe, affordable, before- and after-school programs for children.
- 6. The business community has an important role to play in improving child care.** Studies show that child care problems affect worker productivity and retention. Employers should take steps to help address the child care needs of their workforce.
- 7. Government, private industry, educators, nonprofit organizations and parents must commit to a partnership to improve the child care options for all families.** The child care problems this country faces are so deeply embedded that our collective energies, brainpower and resources will be necessary to solve them.

Action Recommendations

Based on these principles for quality child care/early childhood education, the Milwaukee Jewish Council for Community Relations supports the following actions:

- **To ensure affordability**, increase federal, state and local funding for child care and school-age programs. Several important programs such as the Community Learning Centers and Head Start need to be fully funded so that they cover all eligible children.
- **To ensure the availability of quality programs**, improve licensing, standards and program evaluation mechanisms to ensure that children participate in programs that are safe and that meet their physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs.
- **Increase the compensation and training of child care workers**. It is scandalous that the salaries of those who care for our most precious possessions, our children, are below a living wage. The low wages and lack of benefits and training for child care workers may be the biggest impediment to providing quality services. Funds should be available so that child care workers receive wages and benefits equal to those earned by other educators. Additionally, affordable in-service training and professional development programs must be made available to workers.
- **To ensure employer support**, provide outreach programs that help employers realize the importance of child care and early childhood education.
- **To ensure consumer education**, expand resource and referral services available to parents, provide information on how to select and monitor quality care, and develop public information about the importance of early childhood education.
- **To provide parents with the support and parenting skills they need**, expand outreach services and training for parents of infants and toddlers. An excellent example is the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) developed by NCJW.

Acknowledgements: Portion of this statement were excerpted from the National Council of Jewish Women study cited below. This statement was developed in collaboration with the National Council of Jewish Women - Milwaukee Section and we want to recognize NCJW's leadership on this vital issue.

Sources

We gratefully acknowledge the following sources that were used to develop this position statement:

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