

Fall 2011 | Project PLAY

Every Child in Foster Care Deserves Our Best.

Quality Childcare: More Than Just a Safe Place

Like most parents of young children, many foster parents work outside the home, and child care is a necessity. These parents look for child care that is safe, affordable and convenient. But what if child care could provide more?

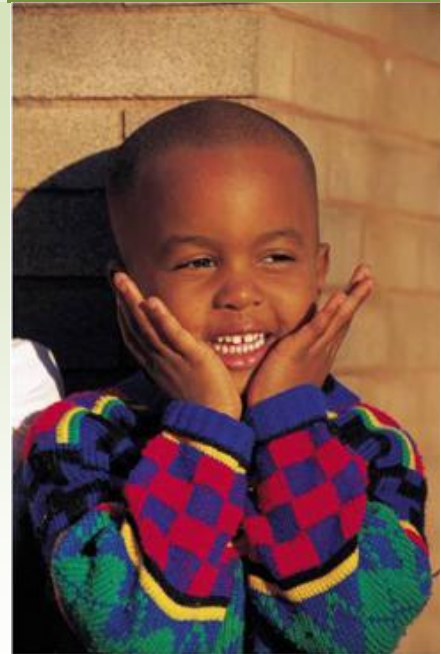
Children in foster care deserve our best efforts to turn this ‘what if’ into a reality. For children who have experienced abuse or neglect, the child welfare system strives to ensure a safe and stable home environment for the child. Other than the home, the child care setting is the place young children spend the most time.¹ These early experiences shape the development of the brain – for better or worse.² Therefore it is critical that we look for opportunities to increase access to stable, high quality child care for children in foster care.

Children in foster care, like all children, fare best when they have stable, nurturing relationships with caring, consistent adults.

Need For Stability

Stability is a critical ingredient to the development of all relationships, especially those between young children and their caregivers. A key developmental task of infancy is forming an attachment to at least one primary caregiver. ‘Attachment’ develops when children’s needs are met through consistent, responsive caregiving. Through this relationship, children learn that the world is a safe place and that their needs will be met. Stability allows a child to gain a sense of security and trust.

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What if ...

- the child care center was a safe-haven when home life has been disrupted – a place where the child could count on a predictable routine and familiar caregiver?
- the child care center was a place where developmental delays were quickly identified and children received the support they need to be successful?
- teachers understood the unique challenges facing foster children and were equipped to build social skills and handle challenging behaviors in a positive way?
- teachers, parents and child welfare staff worked together to address the needs of the child and ensure consistency between home and school?



Attachment

Secure attachments support the infant's exploration of the world and provide the foundation for healthy development. Attachment is linked to the ability to learn, to control one's behavior, to have school success, and to be able to form relationships with others. Children who are unable to form and maintain an attachment to at least one stable, trusted adult suffer. Disrupted attachment contributes to emotional, social, and behavior problems and can have negative effects on the developing brain.³ The results can be delays in learning, dysfunction in other relationships, and problems regulating emotions. Children without healthy early attachments are also at higher risk for delinquency, substance abuse, and depression later in life.⁴ Attention to children's attachment is essential for improving outcomes for children in protective services.⁵

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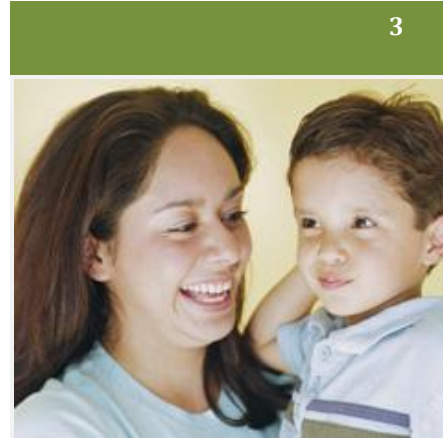
Mothers and/or fathers are usually the primary attachment figure for a child, but other adults in the child's life can also be stable attachment figures. For children in foster care, their relationships have been disrupted, and their ability to develop a secure attachment has already been compromised.⁶ Frequent moves reduce children's ability to develop secure healthy attachments and social-emotional health.⁴ These children may be able to compensate for their loss by forming attachments to other caring adults (like foster parents) who are a regular part of their life and understand the child's need for closeness and security – even when the child's behavior makes that difficult.

Evidence suggests secure attachments with teachers or caregivers also offer advantages for young children, and children can benefit from attachment to more than one person.¹ In a child care setting, babies who are securely attached to a caregiver explore, play, and interact better than babies whose caregivers change frequently.^{1,7} These important relationships develop over time, and cannot fully develop if the child experiences frequent disruptions in child care providers.

Developing close relationships can be a challenge for foster children since they often experience multiple moves. Reducing the number of moves between both homes and child care centers can promote the development of supportive relationships with foster parents, teachers, and peers and support social-emotional development.⁹ While the importance of stable family relationships is widely acknowledged, the need for stable relationships in the child care setting is often overlooked – and the negative impacts of sudden and frequent changes in caregivers are often ignored.¹⁰

Predictability

While stability in home and child care is critical for developing close relationships, it is also important because children thrive in a predictable environment. Like all of us, they do best when they have regular routines and they know what to expect each day. This predictability is important for reducing anxiety in young children and is especially important for children in foster care. Children who have experienced abuse or neglect may be prone to anxiety because their environment has already proven to be unpredictable, and this anxiety can impair their ability to learn and interact with others.^{11,12}



Upheavals to daily routines can be anxiety-provoking and should be avoided. Most of us remember the anxiety we felt on the first day of school and understand that this is not an experience that we want to ask foster children to repeat over and over.

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Quality Matters

Stability in child care is important. Equally important is the quality of child care. High quality child care is linked to enhanced cognitive, language, and social-emotional development for children. Children in high quality care have been shown to have higher language skills and do better in school. This is especially true for disadvantaged or at-risk children.^{1,13} Children in low quality centers (those with low scores on environmental rating scales) show less growth in language, math, and social-emotional development¹⁴ and are at risk of falling further and further behind.

Being in a low quality child care center may be especially harmful for children in foster care, who are already at high risk for developmental delays. More than half of young children entering foster care have developmental delays, medical problems, or other diagnosis that makes them eligible for Early Intervention services.^{15,16} Young children in the child welfare system (and their parents) can benefit from comprehensive, high quality child care programs.³ Low quality care can make a bad situation even worse for a foster child.

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High Quality Childcare

There are many components of quality child care. One of the most important is how the adults interact with the children – the **caregiver-child relationships**.

In a quality center teachers/caregivers^{1,7}:

- Are sensitive and responsive to children's needs
- Respond quickly and soothingly to a child in distress
- Spend much time talking and listening to children at their eye level
- Use a pleasant, calm voice
- Provide generous attention and support to each child
- Follow children's play lead and talk with them at eye level
- Enjoy being with the children
- Use positive discipline techniques rather than punishment to guide children's behavior
- Understand and use developmental screenings appropriately
- Make referrals for evaluation and services when problems are suspected

Another important component of a quality child care program is the **structure** of the facility.

In a quality classroom^{17,18}:

- The staff-child ratio is low enough for teachers to give plenty of attention to each child
- Group sizes are small enough to allow children to explore and teachers to respond to individual children.
- A variety of toys and learning materials are within children's reach
- Multiples of toys are provided so children do not have to compete
- The daily schedule is child-centered, predictable, and posted
- The center has safety and hygiene policies and procedures that teachers carefully follow
- Children are never left alone
- Teachers are trained in early childhood development and are required to attend trainings and workshops annually
- Developmental screenings are completed on each child. Screenings are used to make referrals to special services when needed or to help teacher plan curriculum that address individual learning needs

When these and other components are in place, children are more likely to receive sensitive and warm caregiving and more likely to make developmental and learning gains. On the other hand, low quality child care is yet another risk factor in the life of a vulnerable child. It is important to know the difference.

In addition to these basics of good care, programs such as Head Start/Early Head Start have a comprehensive, two-generational approach that includes assessment and referral for services as well as parent involvement; both are important components for children in foster care. This may include special therapeutic services including physical, occupational, speech and language therapies, psychological services, case management and more which can help a foster child catch up.^{3,19} While not all families and children in protective services have access to Head Start/Early Head Start or facilities with special services, priority should be given to centers that demonstrate commitment to these basic standards of quality care.



Low Quality Child Care

Unfortunately not all children and families have access to high quality care. Children from low-income or stressed homes are more likely to receive lower quality care.²⁰ Low quality care impedes children's cognitive, social-emotional, and language skills.^{1,20} Children in low quality child care are more likely to experience stress and behavior problems. When caregivers lack understanding of their own role in creating a positive, nurturing environment, children are left without a critical support for healthy development.

Low Quality

In a low quality center teachers/caregivers may:

- Speak harshly to children
- Frequently tell children “no” or what “not to do” instead of teaching the child what “to do”
- Punish rather than problem-solve or redirect when challenging behaviors occur
- Keep children restrained (e.g. left in the crib or high chair) or isolated
- Ignore distressed or crying children
- Neglect to set limits (e.g. allow children to hurt others or engage in unsafe behavior)
- Threaten or yell at children. Use physical punishment
- Rarely smile or show enjoyment in being with children
- Over use of “time out” and miss important opportunities to teach social skills
- Be involved in adult paperwork or talking to adults instead of interacting with children
- Have inappropriate expectations for children

In a child care center with poor attention to appropriate structure, you may see:

- Lack of hygiene procedures such as hand washing, diapering procedures, or keeping areas clean
- Lack of safety policies and procedures
- Too few toys and materials causing children to fight
- Teachers expecting young children to sit still for long periods of time
- Insufficient time and opportunity for large motor play
- Restrictions on parent's ability to visit classrooms
- Lack of training opportunities for teachers
- High teacher turnover

When caregivers lack understanding of their own role in creating a positive, nurturing environment, children are left without a critical support for healthy development.

It makes sense that we would want to ensure that children in foster care are enrolled in quality child care centers. And that they can stay enrolled in the same center while experiencing transitions in their homes. A trusted teacher/caregiver can be a daily comfort for a child moved from family to family as the adults in her/his life work to solve problems.



Foster Care Statistics: Arkansas

In 2010 there were 3,166 children age 5 and under in foster care, up 81% from 2001. Children aged 0-5 represent 36% of all children in foster care. Nearly a third (31%) of children in foster care in 2010 experienced three or more home placements.⁸

From July-October 2011, 1987 child care vouchers were issued for foster children. Of those, 30% were issued for children served in a state-funded pre-kindergarten classroom or a center participating in the state's Quality Rating Improvement System.

Foster Care Statistics: United States

In 2010, 254,375 children entered foster care, and 47% were under 6 years of age. The average length of stay in foster care was 21.7 months.²¹ *For young children, this is a long stretch of time during a key developmental period in their life. The importance of stable and quality child care during this period cannot be overemphasized.*

Policy Recommendations: Promoting Increased Stability and Quality Child Care

Our community can move towards policy and practice that recognizes the special vulnerabilities of children in foster care and make decisions with the goal of addressing all their developmental needs⁴ including placement and continuity in quality child care.

We can promote policies that increase understanding of and access to quality child care:

- Educate those serving children in protective services (family service workers, courts, foster parents, child care professionals) on the importance of including stable, consistent, and quality child care in each child's life as they transition from home to home.
- Establish policies to ensure the first choice is a high quality child care program, especially one with a comprehensive array of services.
- In areas where quality care is scarce, consider contracts with high quality centers, especially those with comprehensive services, to reserve slots for children in foster care.
- Consider developing a team of trained professionals to evaluate the situation when there are concerns about the quality of a center where a child in foster care is enrolled.

We can promote policies that increase stability for children:

- Provide funding or incentives to increase the likelihood a child remains in the same child care center during transition when possible.
- Provide assistance for transportation if needed so the child can continue enrollment after reuniting with biological parents or being moved to a new foster home.
- Support child care centers serving children in foster care in improving quality and reducing staff turnover.
- Bring the child care provider into the case as a team member. Share information on the child's medical and social history, assessments, and needs with the child care provider. Clearly identify what information can be shared while still adhering to confidentiality guidelines.
- Use the child care center the child is familiar with as a visitation site.⁴ Support child care centers in this effort.
- Support foster, adoptive, and biological families in maintaining the child's enrollment. Look into options for continuing vouchers when case closes (through adoption or returning home) to enable the child to remain at the same child care center.



Parents can look for centers participating in the quality improvement system and find a check list for evaluating child care programs on the Better Beginnings website:



www.arbetterbeginnings.com

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Project PLAY is an ongoing program established to facilitate collaboration between Community Mental Health Centers (CMHC's) and early childcare programs by matching early childhood mental health consultants with early care education providers throughout the state of Arkansas