

Texas Association for Infant Mental Health

Building Better Beginnings: Improving Texas Child Care Standards

Executive Summary

For almost 90 years, The State of Texas has had the responsibility to review and recommend minimum child care licensing standards that set the baseline under which all licensed child care can operate. This review of standards is conducted every six years by the Child Care Licensing Division of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. The purpose of the standards is to “protect the health, safety, and well-being of the children of the state ...”

Current Texas standards do not reflect scientific advances and findings about both early development and the significance of these early experiences. Current standards do not adequately safeguard our children physically, emotionally or developmentally.

Texas now has an opportunity and a responsibility to apply this newly gleaned knowledge and public policy support and amend Chapter 42 of the Human Resources Code to more accurately support young children.

Child Care in Texas

The majority of young children in Texas spend most of their days in child care. Providers often spend more awake time with young children than any other caregiver, so it is critical for child care to meet children’s physical, social, and emotional needs.

The Importance of the Earliest Years

Brain research confirms that the environment and relationships a child experiences in his earliest years lay a foundation that affects the rest of his life.

The Importance of Early Experiences

An individual’s success with life skills – the ability to connect with others and find solutions will be greatly affected by what he or she experiences as an infant and young child. While positive early experiences lead to healthy brain development, experiences of neglect and abuse can cause some normal children to develop emotional and cognitive difficulties.

Research illustrates what we intuitively understand: that human development requires human connections. Children need regular, positive interactions with nurturing adults to develop the complex networks of brain connections they will need to form healthy relationships and the capacity to learn. Simply stated, optimal development occurs through a baby feeling important to a caregiver.

Child Care Quality

“The positive relation between child care quality and virtually every facet of children’s development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science.”ⁱ Poor-quality child care is associated with less optimal child outcomes and higher quality care is associated with desirable outcomes. While poor quality may have more devastating effects on children living in poverty, quality is important for all children, regardless of family income.ⁱⁱ

Texas child care often does not provide quality care

Despite the consistency of scientific data and experts’ documentation on the importance of the earliest years, many of our youngest Texans are in child care settings that do not promote their healthy development.

Recent Findings

In the spring of 2009, The Texas Association of Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (TACCRRRA) partnered with the Texas Association for Infant Mental Health (TAIMH) under a grant funded by the Hogg Foundation to conduct a survey and focus groups to get a current snapshot of child care for infants and toddlers in Texas.

The vast majority of respondents support lower child/adult ratios, smaller group sizes and increased training requirements. Interestingly, many providers already exceed standards for infants and toddlers.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The State of Texas must heed the consistent teachings from varied disciplines including science, medicine, child development, law enforcement and education. Despite the different foci and process, they all confirm that early experiences occur in the context of relationships and that these experiences play a critical role in the short and long term success of a child. We have to be reasonable about the standards that allow this to happen. Caregivers need to have fewer children and small enough groups to be able to meet each child’s needs. They also need adequate training to understand development and the importance of continuity of care. Texas must improve licensing standards to improve early experiences and promote optimal development of our youngest Texans.

TAIMH RATIOS AND GROUP SIZE RECOMMENDATION

Child to staff ratios and group sizes are two critical indicators for determining the quality. In order to protect the health, safety and well being of the children of the state, Texas should follow the ratios/group size recommendations outlined by the American Academy of Pediatrics and supported by national experts.

TAIMH TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS

Experts agree that the level of training and education attained by a child care provider is one of the strongest predictors of quality care. Caregivers and directors should be mandated to receive 24 pre-service and 40 ongoing hours to improve the supply of quality child care in Texas.

Trainers also should be registered with the Texas Early Care & Education Career Development System (TECECDS) or hold a degree or certification in a field related to the training topic. Training should be relevant to the care being provided.

TAIMH CONTINUITY OF CARE RECOMMENDATION:

Children thrive from consistent, ongoing positive interactions with a caregiver. Young children can have these experiences and form critical attachments only when their child care providers remain stable over time. Leading experts agree that optimal emotional development comes from having one primary caregiver for more than a year and ideally from entry into child care until the child is at least 3 years of age.

Texas should phase in a continuity of care model by adjusting its standards of group size and ratios not on an annual or part-year basis but grouped by developmental level as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Parents and child care programs also should be educated about the findings on continuity of care and be encouraged to implement complementary procedures.

Moving Forward

No one argues anymore about what is good for children. No one would object in principle to raising the standards. The true barrier is the cost of this care and its implications. But that is not a reason to cheat our most vulnerable citizens. Texas must find creative federal, local, and private means to finance child care programs that meet their physical, social and developmental needs.

The purpose of Texas's child care minimum standards is to "protect the health, safety, and well-being of the children of the state." It is imperative that the state of Texas identify and commit funding to improve ratios, group size, training, and education on continuity in care in this revision of minimum standards. We know too much now not to.

ⁱ Shonkoff, J., & Phillips, d. (Eds.). (2000). From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

ⁱⁱ Love, J. M., Schochet, p. Z., & Meckstrom, a. (1996). Are they in any real danger? What research does – and doesn't – tell us about child care quality and children's well-being. Princeton, NJ: Mathematica Policy Research, inc.