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Women's Fund
OF SANTA BARBARA

A Snapshot of Early Child Care and Education in south Santa Barbara County

**A Report by the Women's Fund
Research Committee**

In response to members' requests for brief reports on areas of compelling need for women, children and families in south Santa Barbara County, the Women's Fund Research Committee has prepared this snapshot report on early child care and education.

In the 2016 membership survey, early childhood services were voted as the second highest area of community need. Education, voted the highest area of need, was previously addressed in a 2015 Research Committee Report. (Both the 2016 Survey and 2015 Report on Education can be found in the [WF Library](#) on the Women's Fund website.)

Introduction

Obtaining quality child care for children from birth to age five is a critical need for working parents in Santa Barbara County. More than 19,000 children need early care and education in Santa Barbara County according to the Child Care Needs Assessment completed in 2015. Currently, only 10,000 spaces are available. The need is greatest for very young children, aged birth to two years. In this age group, adequate child care is available for only one out of every five children.

Because the needs exceed existing resources, community leaders have formed networks and associations to focus public attention on the problems created by inadequate child care. Government agencies, school districts, businesses, nonprofits, foundations and other community organizations are coordinating their efforts to improve the services available to parents, families and young children in Santa Barbara County.

Why is early childhood development important?

What happens in early childhood can matter for a lifetime. Scientific studies increasingly show that early childhood experiences have lifelong impacts on emotional, social, intellectual and physical development. Research consistently documents the benefits of stable, responsive, nurturing relationships and safe, stimulating, learning environments in the earliest years.

What do we know about the neuroscience of early childhood development?

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has published extensive studies showing the critical importance of brain development during the first years of life. In early childhood, 700 new synapses (neural connections) are formed every second! Gradually those connections are reduced through a natural process called pruning. The brain becomes more efficient by eliminating circuits that aren't being used, a process often described as "use it or lose it." Very young children who enjoy rich physical and social environments show more complex neural development, which lays the foundation for thinking and learning throughout their lives. (More information can be found at the [Center on the Developing Child](#).)

Why is early childhood stress damaging?

In contrast, research also confirms the negative effects caused by chronic stress in childhood. Major adversity, such as extreme poverty, abuse or neglect, can interfere with brain development and permanently set the body's stress response system on high alert, contributing to a wide range of chronic physical and mental problems. Investing in quality child care makes it less likely that children, their families and the larger society will have to contend with these difficulties. (The Center on the Developing Child has as a [report on the damaging effects of toxic stress](#).)

How is the need for early child care documented in Santa Barbara County?

Local child care planning councils (LPCs) in all counties of California must complete a needs assessment of early care and education at least every five years according to the California Education Code, Section 8499.5. The Santa Barbara County Child Care Planning Council (CCPC) is an LPC and is also required by the Education Code to create a five-year strategic plan for early care and education services that offers strategies for filling the needs identified in the needs assessment. In addition, the needs assessment informs the establishment of zip code priorities for publicly-funded programs, another state mandate for the LPCs. Presently the South County zip codes given first priority for child care are: 93013, 93101, 93105, 93106, 93110, 93111, and 93117. An updated plan is now being developed and will be available on the CCPC website shortly. (The full [Child Care Needs Assessment](#) can be accessed at the Santa Barbara County Child Care Planning Council website.)

What types of special needs have been documented in Santa Barbara?

The 2015 Needs Assessment documented the following special needs among children in Santa Barbara County: those with identified disabilities, those at risk of abuse and neglect, families who are homeless, families supported by migrant agriculture, families with low incomes, children of teen mothers, and children who are dual-language learners. Children in all of these situations are particularly likely to benefit from quality child care.

Is early care and education affordable to families?

Average monthly cost for infant care in south Santa Barbara County ranges from \$1,037 in Family Child Care homes to \$1,173 in Child Care Centers. For preschoolers, monthly fees range from \$848 to \$888. These costs can be prohibitively expensive for working families, especially for those who do not qualify for subsidized care. For example, if a family with an annual median income of \$61,782 has an infant and a preschooler in center-based care, they may need to spend up to 34% of their income for child care. Because of high housing costs in south Santa Barbara County, even parents who have good jobs may be unable to afford quality child care.

Is state or federally funded early care available?

Working families with incomes below 70% of the State Median Income (SMI) are eligible to apply for state or federally-funded early care and education programs. Currently, there are not enough spaces in these programs to meet demand. For infants and toddlers, aged zero to two, 2,784 spaces are needed but only 391 are available. For preschoolers, 5,843 spaces are needed and 2,549 are available. Also, eligibility based on the SMI has not been updated since 2008, so many families who need care are unable to obtain it. (The [Schedule of Income Ceilings](#) may be viewed at CA Department of Education.)

What types of early care and education facilities are available for subsidized care?

Families who qualify for subsidized care may enroll their children in a licensed child care center or a family child care home, if spaces are available. When licensed care is not available, they are allowed to use subsidies to pay for license-exempt care by family, friends, or neighbors (FFN). Presently, 42% of infants and toddlers receiving subsidized care in Santa Barbara County are known to be in licensed settings, and 85% of eligible preschoolers are in licensed center-based or family child care homes.

How is subsidized care funded?

In Santa Barbara County, subsidized child care is supported by seven state and federal funding streams. These are channeled through school districts, the County Education Office, Department of Social Services, Children's Resource and Referral Agency, other nonprofit agencies, and institutions of higher education. Funded programs include California State Preschool, General Child Care, Head Start and CalWORKS.

Are support programs available for parents?

Various cultural and economics factors make quality early child care difficult for parents to secure, including: low incomes, multiple employers, lack of personal transportation, language barriers and cultural differences. Both public and private agencies collaborate together to provide parent support programs, including child development and parent skill building, and referrals to address basic needs and healthcare. This multifaceted approach to supporting families can reduce the rate of child abuse and neglect, thus increasing the likelihood that children will be academically and socially prepared to succeed in school.

First 5 is a statewide program established in 1999 by the passage of Proposition 10. In Santa Barbara County, it funds and administers a range of parent support services through several public and private agencies, including the Network of Family Resource Centers. (The [First 5 Strategic Plan](#) is available on their website.)

How many accredited programs are available?

The quality of early childhood programs is assessed by two national accreditation organizations which certify programs that meet their standards. In Santa Barbara County, 58 centers (39%) are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and 15 family child care homes (3%) are accredited by the National Association for Family Child Care. (Nationally, 10.3% of centers and .3% of family child care homes are accredited.) In addition, 31 local centers and 18 family child care homes are currently in the process of applying for accreditation.

What programs have been developed to improve the quality of early care and education?

A Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) was launched by the state to improve the quality of center- and home-based early learning programs. The QRIS system uses a five point scale to rate programs in three areas: child development and readiness for school, teacher support of young children's learning and development, and program and classroom environment.

This systematic program gives agencies, parents and the public a tool for evaluating and comparing early care and education programs. Child care providers also have a metric that encourages self assessment and continuous improvement. By acknowledging that emotional and social development are prime factors for success in school, the QRIS encourages programs to develop a multifaceted approach to child care and development.

How are early caregivers trained and compensated?

Early care and education professionals receive training and incentives for higher education coursework and other professional development through several initiatives available locally: First 5 California's IMPACT grant, which supports providers participating in the QRIS; AB 212 which supports staff in state-funded center-based programs; the State Preschool QRIS Block Grant; and the Infant Toddler QRIS Block Grant. In addition, the Community Action Commission, which provides Head Start and Early Head Start, offers training for their staff.

There are increased efforts to provide support to home child care providers, both licensed and unlicensed (family, friends and neighbors) by providing programs directly in their neighborhoods.

Compensation for early childhood providers tends to be low and does not reflect the critical importance of care during the early years of life. The issue is complex because increased salaries may limit access by raising costs for parents. Public support could be influential in raising salaries to be commensurate with the training and professionalism required for high- quality early care and education.

How can the community support access to quality child care?

Public and private agencies involved with early care and education are engaged in an ongoing effort to inform the public about the gap between the need and available services. In particular, there is concern about families that do not qualify for subsidies because they earn more than 70% of the State Median Income. Some funding sources, both public and private, have made a short-term effort to

provide scholarships and other grants to families that struggle to pay for child care but are currently ineligible for public subsidies. The long-term solution requires updating State Median Income guidelines to be in line with the cost of living in south Santa Barbara County, something that is more likely to happen with public support.

In addition, a number of groups are working to increase the number of high-quality child care spaces in South County. The Children's Resource and Referral Agency used a recent grant from the Women's Fund to recruit additional infant home care providers and guide them through the licensing process. Some accredited centers would also like to expand the number of children they can serve, but they are hindered by the challenges of finding affordable facilities and adequate financial support.

Conclusion

The research confirming the critical importance of early childhood development is incontrovertible. The multifaceted approach of public and private organizations in Santa Barbara County has resulted in improvements in early care and education, but more needs to be done. Specifically, parents need more information and support, child care providers need training to improve their skills, and licensed as well as unlicensed centers and homes need additional education and equipment. More quality child care facilities need to be developed, especially for infant care. Healthcare needs to be systematically provided beginning with pre-natal care. All children need access to the comprehensive nurturing that will prepare them socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically for kindergarten.

For every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood programs, an average of seven dollars in returns is realized according to studies by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. In addition to increased earnings for individuals which result in increased tax revenues, the public benefits include a decrease in expenditures for special education, welfare and crime. Our community is increasingly aware of the need to invest in early care and education both because it benefits individual children and their families and because it strengthens the community as a whole.