



Accessing quality early care and education for children in child welfare: Stakeholders' perspectives on barriers and opportunities for interagency collaboration



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ABSTRACT

Emerging evidence suggests that high quality early care and education (ECE) programs can improve children's developmental outcomes, particularly for at-risk children. Yet, ECE remains under-utilized by children in the child welfare system. This study illuminates some of the reasons for this by presenting findings from a series of ten focus groups with child welfare workers, ECE providers, and parents/caregivers of young children involved with the child welfare system (N = 78). Fourteen themes emerged regarding organizational and system-level barriers to enrolling children involved with the child welfare system in ECE. These include generic barriers to inter-agency collaboration in human services, such as challenging work climates characterized by limited resources, high workloads and staff turnover, and lack of guidelines for collaborative infrastructure. Findings more specific to inter-agency collaboration between child welfare and ECE include the disruptive effect of foster placement changes and case closures on ECE stability, policies restricting ECE eligibility and availability for birth and/or foster parents, and child welfare workers' limited understanding of the value of high quality, learning based ECE programs versus custodial child care, particularly for infants and toddlers. Policy and practice recommendations to improve ECE utilization and service coordination among child welfare and ECE organizations are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In federal fiscal year 2013, 50 states/territories confirmed that an estimated 679,000 (9.1 per 1000) American children were abused or neglected. Fully forty (40.5%) percent of these children were less than five-years old (USDHHS, 2015a). According to the most recently available federal data, a third (34%) of U.S. children in foster care are less than five-years old (USDHHS, 2015b). Young children in this age group are also disproportionately represented in the U.S. foster care system, both because they are removed from their families more often than older children and because they tend to stay in out-of-home care longer (Wulczyn & Hislop, 2002).

Several quasi-experimental and observational studies document an association between early maltreatment and delayed language, cognitive development and socioemotional development (Casanueva, Stambaugh, Tuellar, Dolan, & Smith, 2012; Pears & Fisher, 2005; Stahmer et al.,

2005). This is cause for concern because, when these early developmental deficits are left unaddressed, they can impede children's school readiness and subsequent chances of academic success (Crozier & Barth, 2005; Fantuzzo & Periman, 2007). Evidence suggests that high quality early care and education (ECE) programs can improve children's developmental outcomes over the short-, and sometimes long-term (Abbott-Shim, Lambert, & McCarty, 2003; Clements, Reynolds, & Hickey, 2004; Love et al., 2005; USDHHS, 2010).

1.1. Benefits of quality early care and education for children in child welfare

Quality ECE is generally defined in terms of structural or process measures (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992; Phillips, Howes, & Whitebook, 1992). Quality structural measures include high caregiver-to-child ratios, consistent accreditation status and program evaluation, environmental health and safety certification, staff credentialing and education, and licensing compliance (Hayes et al., 1990; Howes et al., 1992). Quality process measures include caregiver characteristics (i.e. warmth, sensitivity and stability), structured curriculum, heterogeneity of age of children in care, and parent involvement (Gelber & Isen, 2011; Hayes et al., 1990). The existing literature concerning benefits of quality informal child care or family child care homes is restricted to children not involved with the child welfare system.

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Yet, what remains clear is that the quality of care, as well as time spent in care, is critical in assessing outcomes associated with ECE programs (Waldfoegel, 2002). In a review of 45 studies that examined the association between child care quality and child outcomes, four studies, quasi-experimental in design, found clear linear relationships between improved structural quality of care and improved language skills, school-readiness, and decreased externalizing behaviors in children (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Additionally, eight studies in the review found that lower child-to-adult ratios resulted in caregivers that provided more “stimulating, responsive, warm and supportive care” which resulted in higher scores across a range of measures and ultimately translated to decreased externalizing behavior among children (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000, p. 14).

Three recent studies document positive links between ECE program participation and early developmental outcomes specifically among children in the child welfare system (Kovan, Mishra, Susman-Stillman, Piescher, & LaLiberte, 2014; Lipscomb, Pratt, Schmitt, Pears, & Kim, 2013; Merritt & Klein, 2015). Kovan et al. (2014) found that among children enrolled in ECE programs that were highly rated by Minnesota’s quality rating system, both children in the child protection system and matched controls experienced improvement in their social competence and receptive vocabulary over the course of their final year of ECE prior to Kindergarten entry. However, neither group of children demonstrated improvements in math reasoning, anger/aggression or anxiety/withdrawal. Young children who received center-based ECE had better language outcomes 18 months later than those who did not receive these services. Moreover, evidence from the Head Start Impact Study, a randomized controlled trial of the largest federally-supported ECE program in the U.S., indicates that this program has positive, direct, short and longer term effects on children in nonparental care (i.e. those living with relatives or foster parents through child welfare system intervention as well as through other arrangements) (Lipscomb et al., 2013). Children in nonparental care who participated in Head Start had lower levels of externalizing behavior problems and scored higher on a composite measure of Woodcock Johnson II subtests designed to measure pre-reading and letter/word identification, developing mathematics, early writing and spelling skills (Lipscomb et al., 2013). While many of the positive effects of Head Start on the full study sample appear to fade after the Head Start year, this does not appear to be the case for children in nonparental care who continue to experience benefits one year later (Lipscomb et al., 2013).

There is also evidence that ECE programs may help the child welfare system achieve its goals of safety and permanency for children, likely through providing much needed parenting support and respite for stressed caregivers. Meloy and Phillips (2012) found that children whose foster parents used child care subsidies experienced fewer placement disruptions than those who caregivers did not. With respect to safety, at the neighborhood level, the local availability of ECE and rates of preschool utilization have been linked to lower rates of child welfare system involvement (Klein, 2011). Additionally, participation in Head Start, Early Head Start (EHS), and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers preschool program have all been associated with lower rates of child maltreatment, particularly over the long term (Green et al., 2014; Reynolds & Robertson, 2003; Zhai, Waldfoegel, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). In the case of the Chicago Child-Parent Center, these findings were dramatic, with preschool program participants half as likely as matched controls to be the subject of a confirmed child maltreatment (5% versus 10.5% respectively) (Reynolds & Robertson, 2003).

1.2. Benefits of early care and education for infants and toddlers

A longitudinal follow-up of children enrolled in the EHS Research and Evaluation Project found that EHS participants had significantly fewer child welfare encounters between ages five and nine years and that EHS slowed the rate of subsequent encounters (Green et al., 2014). These findings are noteworthy because they highlight the potential value of ECE for infants and toddlers in, or at risk of entering, the

child welfare system. The benefits of ECE for this particular age group deserves comment given that American parents tend to be more ambivalent about placing their infants and toddlers in ECE in comparison to older children (Ehrle, Adams, & Tout, 2001), perhaps because of concerns that placement in nonparental care will interfere with the maternal–infant bond and attachment. However, the research on EHS suggests that this form of ECE, at least, is beneficial to infants and toddlers, not only in reducing the risk of maltreatment and recurring maltreatment (Green et al., 2014), but also in promoting development. Results of the EHS Research and Evaluation Project demonstrate that EHS positively impacts children’s language and cognitive development, with children who received EHS being significantly less likely than controls to score in the developmentally at-risk range in both these areas (USDHHS, 2006). Additionally, at age three, children who were in EHS displayed less aggression than controls. Studies that take a more expansive look at ECE, as opposed to focusing on a singular program model like EHS, also suggest that ECE can promote the positive development of infants and toddlers if the care provided is of sufficient quality (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002; Sylva, Stein, Leach, Barnes, & Malmberg, 2011). These benefits are most pronounced when children are experiencing low quality parental caregiving at home (Sylva et al., 2011), which logic suggests is often the case for children in, or at risk of involvement with, the child welfare system.

1.3. Under-utilization of early care and education by children in child welfare

Despite the importance of ECE participation for young children in the child welfare system, available data indicate that ECE is under-utilized by the child welfare population. For instance, approximately 65% of low-income 3–6 year olds in the general population who are not yet enrolled in Kindergarten are participating in center-based ECE (ChildStats, 2011). Yet, this is true of only 41% of 3–5 year olds in the child welfare system (Casanueva et al., 2012). Also, despite the fact that children in foster care are automatically eligible for free Head Start and Early Head Start services, national enrollment statistics from 2008 to 2009 show that less than 10% of 0–5 year olds in foster care received these services during this time (ACF, 2010).

1.4. Organizational and system-level barriers to interagency collaboration

Whether or not children in the child welfare system receive ECE depends largely on the extent to which infrastructure is in place to ensure seamless service coordination across child welfare agencies and ECE providers (Osofsky & Lieberman, 2011). Service coordination through interagency collaboration brings benefits for agencies, including increased financial resources, greater visibility and presence in the community, enhanced legitimacy and credibility, as well as decreased service fragmentation, redundancy, and cost (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002; Mitchell, 2014; Seldon, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006). Nevertheless, the extant literature reveals that interagency collaboration and service coordination are difficult to accomplish in the ‘real world’ as multiple organizational and system-level barriers exist (Axelsson & Axelsson, 2006; Glisson & James, 1992).

The organizational climate within partnering agencies is an example of an organizational level barrier. Organizational climate refers to the work environment that employees collectively experience and includes such things as supervisor support or leadership, shared goal setting, level of trust among employees, and communication within the organization (Bednar, 2003; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). An agency’s organizational climate contributes to employees’ work attitudes and the level at which they understand policies and practices (Glisson & Green, 2011). Employee work attitudes, their perception of management styles as either supportive or pressuring, and their understanding of the goal of policies and practices affect service delivery. As a result, organizational climate directly affects worker’s job satisfaction, turnover,

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