

Public policies and programs that address the needs of young children's education and care must consider a variety of aspects of children's well-being, and parent and consumer concerns, while strengthening the quality of the child care environment through support to its workforce. The following list can be used when assessing these programs and policies to determine the extent to which comprehensive interests are addressed. A more detailed Cooperative Extension publication entitled, Assessing Early Care and Education Public Policies and Programs is also available, and provides more in-depth discussion of the principles below.

PRINCIPLE 1: ENCOURAGE PARENTAL CHOICE

Programs and policies should aim to support the multiple considerations of parents in their search for early care and education.

Does the policy or program:

- Recognize a full range of choices in care giving arrangements?
- Support parents' ability to carry out their responsibility for finding safe, affordable and quality child care?
- Identify and publicly support child care services for families in the most extreme economic or social need?
- Involve all family members who may play a role in finding and choosing care?
- Make services for choosing care and education accessible to all families, regardless of status related to income, language, location?
- Anticipate trends and changing family needs?

PRINCIPLE 2: PROVIDE COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Children's healthy growth and development is tremendously strengthened by an integrated system of family and community support.. Family involvement should be a central focus of the child's program. and should provide connective linkages to other community services and educational programs.

Does the policy or program:

- Connect early care to other programs that support children's healthy development and education (e.g., health care, parent education, community services)
- Build upon the connection between early care and other educational programs to ensure children's smooth transition from early education to elementary school?
- Connect parents and other family members to other services that support family needs?
- Specify a variety of ways that family members can be involved with their children's care and education?
- Recognize and build upon the successes of other early childhood programs that meet the comprehensive needs of children and families?

PRINCIPLE 3: QUALITY CARE & EDUCATION

Child care quality is measured by specific indicators known to improve outcomes for children. Children in high quality child care programs develop stronger language, reading, and math skills and fewer behavior problems than children in mediocre or poor quality programs. Programs and policies should support efforts to establish, maintain, and evaluate the quality of care provided as an integral part of the child care program.

Does the policy or program:

- Support practices that are developmentally appropriate for the age of children served?
- Support regular inspection and enforcement of minimum standards established by the state's child care regulatory system?
- Strengthen state standards by adopting nationally recognized quality indicators in early care and education (such as those developed by NAEYC, NAFCC, or the ITERS/ECERS)?
- Include policies and practices such as observation, assessment, and goal setting to maintain the quality of care and achieve higher levels of quality?
- Require assessment and evaluation to ensure that high quality outcomes and goals are being reached?
- Tie staff incentives and rewards to high quality outcomes?

PRINCIPLE 4: STRENGTHEN THE EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Workforce quality is directly related to quality of care and ensures positive outcomes for children. Workforce programs and policies should support the environmental, work and family life, and continuing education needs of all child care professionals and paraprofessionals. Recruitment and retention of high quality early childhood professionals provides secure, nurturing relationships for children and consistency in achieving early education outcomes.

Does the policy or program:

- Provide incentives, rewards, or other supports for professional development?
- Support adequate compensation including wages and benefits for child care professionals?
- Include support services for early care and education professionals (such as mentoring, technical assistance, substitute services, professional development consultation, financial incentives)?
- Offer a range of options for continuing education or other professional enhancements?

PRINCIPLE 5: ENSURE ACCESS

Families face many challenges when seeking care for their children. Child care is frequently hard to locate and is of limited quality. Many families must "patch" together several child care arrangements to ensure even minimal care. Children need the security of a stable, nurturing child care environment.

Does the policy or program:

- Provide comprehensive information on available child care options?
- Support an adequate number of child care spaces for children of different ages (infants, preschool, school-age)?
- Support an adequate number of child care spaces for children with languages other than English?
- Encourage the development of child care in underserved areas (e.g., remote, inner city)?
- Support the inclusion of children with special needs in natural child care settings?
- Recognize and support the transportation needs of families to access care?
- Strengthen the stability and availability of existing child care programs?

PRINCIPLE 6: IMPROVE AFFORDABILITY

High quality child care is often beyond the financial reach of many families. Paradoxically, most child care programs struggle to secure sufficient financial support to maintain even basic, services. Often, adult-child ratios necessary for high quality care limits the income of programs. The provision of high quality care requires a significant investment of financial resources.

Does the policy or program:

- Provide adequate financial assistance for families of all income levels?
- Support parental choice of care by eliminating financial barriers?
- Expedite subsidy payments and create user-friendly assistance systems?
- Provide extensive outreach to families to ensure awareness of eligibility and procedures?
- Provide coordination between different funding programs?
- Improve linkages between direct subsidy and tax subsidy systems?
- Ensure adequate accountability within each funding system?
- Include funding to support adequate regulatory requirements?
- Reward programs that meet high quality standards with higher levels of financial support?

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