

For many families with young children, child care rates fourth among household expenses behind housing, food, and taxes. Because child care is expensive, parents often assume that child care providers are well paid and work with ample budgets. Sadly, this is not the case. The National Association for the Education of Young Children wants parents and families to know exactly where child care dollars go.

Good child care depends on having enough qualified people to provide care for children. And the younger children are, the more staff is necessary to give them more individual attention, and therefore proper care. Personnel costs are typically the highest proportion of a center's budget at 50% or more. However, other expenses such as space, insurance, teaching supplies, snacks, and utilities are often fixed and more demanding.

Fixed costs have risen over the years, yet the fees that centers charge have remained relatively stable when adjusted with inflation. This means that teachers' salaries in child care centers have steadily declined some 25% since the mid-70s.

The fact is that the salaries of child care workers are painfully inadequate. National surveys report that preschool teachers employed in centers earned approximately \$15,000 per year in 1995. Assistant teachers report earnings (before costs) of approximately \$11,000 per year. These salaries are extremely low even in comparison to other female-dominated professions such as public school teachers and registered nurses, traditionally recognized as underpaid.

Why should low salaries in child care concern parents? The answer is simple. Low salaries are directly linked to high rates of staff turnover. High rates of staff turnover -- nearly 40% per year, nationally -- mean that the warm, caring relationship between your child and teacher is frequently disrupted. The result is poor quality care and children who show lower language and social skills.

Low salaries also make it difficult for programs to attract and retain qualified staff. Children at every age benefit when teachers have professional knowledge and formal training in child development. These children demonstrate better social skills, as well as greater language and intellectual abilities. Early childhood programs that offer higher wages and health benefits are more attractive to the trained and educated providers.

The Solutions

Working together, there are a number of concrete actions that families and early childhood professionals can take to break the cycle of inadequate staff compensation, lower program quality, and negative outcomes for children.

1. Share this information with parents and others in your community.

2. Find out if your child's teacher or caregiver receives paid sick leave, health insurance, and other benefits. Support efforts to improve the working conditions and benefits received by early childhood staff.
3. Write to your city council members and state and federal legislators and tell them how you depend on high quality programs and how their costs affect you.
4. Contact the local news media and urge coverage of the facts about child care and its costs.
5. Ask your employer or union to join the growing number of businesses that provide child care benefits to their employees.
6. Join with child and family advocates working to improve program quality at the local, state, and federal levels.

Your child care dollar lays the foundation of your child's education. As a nation, we depend on everyone's investment in our future. That investment must include high quality early childhood care and education for all young children -- they deserve nothing less!

This article was prepared by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).