



Bipartisan Policy Center

Examining the Role of Faith-Based Child Care

Early Childhood Initiative

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Introduction

Faith-based organizations—encompassing both religious ministry and religious-oriented community groups—play an important role in American society, including in the delivery of child care. Faith-based organizations are in a powerful position. They have a strong infrastructure and understand the needs of their communities. Faith leaders are uniquely positioned to share information about child care and advocate for children and families. Whether hosting a co-located child care program or operating a child care facility, faith-based organizations can shape families' experiences and perceptions of early care and education.

To understand what drives parental choice when it comes to options among early childhood programs, parents who use faith-based child care are an important and sometimes overlooked population. Knowing the reasons parents select their child care program supports having targeted and effective policies. In a national poll conducted by Bipartisan Policy Center in December 2020, we found that 31% of working-parent households used center-based care, and over half, or 53%, of these families used one that was affiliated with a faith organization.¹ Parents additionally cited trust as the leading factor for why they selected their child care program.²

Faith-based child care programs that represent and instill the values parents are seeking for their children can drive portions of the child care market. At the same time, faith-based child care can offer settings and curriculums that support children's healthy development and successful learning. As the effects of the pandemic continue to impact the nation's child care market, inclusivity of all parent child care preferences will be especially critical to supporting a comprehensive child care system in this country.

Little research exists on the role faith-based child care plays for many families in the United States. As COVID-19 impacted child care's already fragile system, lessons learned from the faith-based community are a valuable asset to understand how to strengthen the overall child care market and support parent preferences. In support of this report, BPC spoke to a diverse group of faith-based leaders, early care and education providers, and parents to understand the policy opportunities that can be leveraged to support faith-based child care and how faith-based organizations can be engaged to support child care for all families. What we learned will inform future strategies for including faith-based child care in solutions for the nation's child care system, including parental preferences and diverse child care options that best meet the needs of children.



Faith-Based Child Care's Historical Role

The presence of faith-based organizations in child care holds a significant place in the overall development of the country's child care system. Researchers note the earliest evidence of faith-based child care is a nursery founded in 1789 by the Quaker-supported Philadelphia House of Industry.³ The continued presence of faith-based organizations in child care was foundational to the development of a more formalized child care system in the United States, as church-led congregations sought to create permanent educational spaces and support working women in the years after World War II.⁴

Today, the amount of faith-based child care across the country is challenging to quantify. No official national survey of faith-based child care has been conducted since a 1983 study conducted by the National Council of Churches, or NCC, and aggregate data are unavailable on the usage of federal and state child care funding by faith-based organizations. Yet it is broadly accepted by policymakers and community leaders that a broad spectrum of faith-based

organizations provides a significant share of child care for communities.

The NCC study delineated the mission-oriented reasons faith-based organizations may support or provide child care, which are still relevant to today's diverse faith-based child care landscape:

- First, caring for young children is already embedded in the mission of many faith-based organizations.
- Second, child care can be a support for families within a given faith-based organization.
- Third, child care is a community service that supports families beyond the faith-based organization's membership.
- Fourth, child care can serve as religious education, provide religious program content, or nurture the spiritual and religious growth of children. Finally, some faith-based organizations are motivated by a commitment to social justice and supporting vulnerable populations such as low-income families.⁵

In a December 2020 national survey, BPC found that 31% of households with a single parent or two working parents used center-based care, and over half (53%) of these families used one that was affiliated with a faith organization.

Higher income families tend to use faith-affiliated centers at much higher rates than other families. Before the pandemic, 31% of families with an income above \$100,000 used a faith-affiliated center—compared to 19% and 7% for families with an income between \$50,000–\$100,000 and less than \$50,000, respectively.

In unpacking the role faith-based organizations play in child care, it is important to recognize there are many configurations of faith-based child care. Previous studies categorized faith-based child care across a subset of relationships.⁶ Some faith-based child care programs claim a direct affiliation with a faith-based organization; others do not claim an affiliation, yet represent the charitable mission of a larger religious body. Faith-based child care programs may provide religious instruction, impart values that reference faith in their curriculum but not provide religious instruction, or provide secular instruction while operating under a mission embedded with values of faith.

There are also significant variations in faith-based child care program structure. Faith-based organizations may operate a child care program on religious property, directly employ child care staff, and house the child care facilities. In other instances, a faith-based organization may lease space to an outside entity that manages the child care program's operations while maintaining an affiliation. Child care programs located off-site from religious property may also maintain a formal or informal affiliation with a faith-based organization.

Similarly, parents select a faith-based child care program for myriad reasons. A survey conducted by BPC in December 2020 showed the most important factors for choosing faith-based child care were quality of caregivers, facility cleanliness, trust, values of providers, safe setting, and opportunities for cognitive development.⁷

BPC found that faith-based child care is a preferred choice for parents from a variety of communities. The same December 2020 survey discovered of all parents surveyed, 13% said their ideal child care arrangement during COVID-19—if all programs are equally priced and equally accessible—is a faith-based child care center, which was down slightly from the 14% who reported the same at the beginning of 2020.

While a plurality of parents reported their ideal arrangement as providing care for their own child, faith-based child care centers are the second most ideal arrangement.⁸

BPC December 2020 Survey:

- 32% of parents in a faith-based center report approaches to cognitive development as a top factor, compared to 24% of parents in non-faith-based centers.
- 25% of parents in a faith-based center in January 2020 selected individualized attention to their child, compared to 17% in non-faith-based centers.
- 29% of parents in a faith-based center in January 2020 selected approaches to social-emotional learning, compared to 16% in non-faith-based centers.



Policy Meets Faith-Based Child Care

Like other child care programs, faith-based child care is structured as a part-day or full-day program and can charge private tuition to parents. Faith-based child care can also access a range of public funding including Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and state-funded pre-K in some states.

Children in faith-based child care are also eligible to receive a child care subsidy through the Child Care and Development Fund, or CCDF—the largest federal funding source that helps low-income working families pay for child care so they can obtain or maintain employment or attend job training or school—provided they meet minimal health and safety standards.⁹ CCDF is funded through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, or CCDBG, with a portion of funding dedicated to improving the quality of child care for all families. All child care programs are required to meet minimum health and safety guidelines—inclusive of background checks and health and safety training—and receive an annual inspection in order to be eligible to receive CCDF funding.

A confusing falsehood that plagues the faith-based child care community is that they are ineligible to

enroll children receiving a child care subsidy when religious instruction is provided in the classroom. The Department of Health and Human Services specifically clarified that faith-based child care is eligible to receive *indirect* CCDF funds through child care subsidy certificates, inclusive of programs that provide religious instruction.¹⁰ Eligibility for child care subsidy certificates is determined by family income level. Parents use a child care subsidy certificate to offset the cost of a child care slot at the program of their choice.

Direct child care funding in the form of grants and contracts is limited for child care programs providing religious instruction. In response to Supreme Court rulings that established which federal funding mechanisms are available to religious organizations, HHS developed regulations that restrict any faith-based organizations from receiving *direct* federal grants and contracts to support religious activities—such as religious instruction, worship, or proselytization.¹¹ These regulations apply to grants and contracts awarded directly to a child care program to pay for the cost of a child care slot.

As BPC’s policy brief, [Payment Practices to Stabilize Child Care](#), argues that some use of grants and contracts can support the stabilization of the overall child care market. During the reauthorization of CCDBG, federal policymakers considered requiring states use a portion of CCDBG funding to award *direct* grants and contracts to child care programs, particularly in regions with a small supply of high-quality child care. After receiving feedback from Congress and states, the Administration of Children and Families, or ACF, established that states are not required to use grants and contracts in their child care subsidy programs, but they can consider them as a method to support child care stability in regions with limited child care access.¹²

State policies for targeting the improvement of child care program quality are most often implemented through statewide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, or QRIS. Forty-six states and Washington, DC have fully implemented QRIS to support increasing child care quality through demonstrated performance standards, including staff qualifications

and facilities improvements.¹³ Similar to QRIS, accreditation evaluates the quality of child care programs according to professional standards. Achieving accreditation shows parents the child care program is committed to standards of quality and ongoing program improvement.

Faith-based accreditation can be included in QRIS as an alternative pathway for child care programs to achieve a higher quality rating. For example, nine states have fully accepted The Association of Christian Schools International’s accreditation protocol and are given a higher ranking in QRIS—Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Nevada, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and Washington.¹⁴

Finally, faith-based child care is eligible to participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program, or CACFP, as long as the program meet licensing standards. As administered by the Department of Agriculture, CACFP subsidizes meals and snacks in participating child care programs.



Shared Experiences Within Faith-Based Child Care

BPC engaged a broad spectrum of national and state faith-based leaders, child care providers, and parents representing denominations inclusive of Catholic, Jewish, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, and Presbyterian. BPC also attempted to engage Muslim and Evangelical communities within the project but was unsuccessful in obtaining their participation at the time of publication. The interviews provided introspective vantages of the lessons faith-based child care can impart to the overall child care market and insight into which motivating factors can drive communities of faith to support child care.

MISSION-DRIVEN PROGRAMMING AND VALUES

Through our polls, surveys, focus groups, and interviews with faith-based organizations and parents, value-driven experiences and relationships were consistently cited as the sustaining reason

families selected or came to appreciate faith-based child care. By explicitly embedding the act of caring for children, either within the mission of a faith-based organization or as an expressed tenet of faith, parents expressed that shared values are important—even if they were not members of the organization’s congregation or if the program did not explicitly use a religious-based curriculum.

“Families are not always seeking a denomination as much as they are a community when choosing a faith-based programs,” said a parent with a child in a faith-based child care program in Pittsburgh, PA. “Universal values through a Jewish lens speaks to a lot of [families] and how they want to raise their children now.”

Similar to the findings of BPC’s December 2020 survey, parents we spoke with also shared that the quality of staff and curriculum were motivating factors in selecting a faith-based child care, particularly for parents focused on their child’s preparation for school. Parents who are not affiliated

“From my perspective, we look at the whole child and the spiritual perspective is a part of that. I speak to [parents] about the science perspective and the Biblical perspective. We all have this intrinsic need to be known,” said a director of a faith-based child care program in Indiana.

with the program’s denomination may select the program because of factors related to cost, quality, and availability—and also find the faith-based aspects are beneficial to their child’s development and their family’s experience with the program.

A national administrator for a Jewish-based organization estimated that across nearly 175 child care programs under their organizational umbrella, about 50% of families served were not of the Jewish faith. “We are not so different than everyone else—teachers, location, and cost are the largest driving factors. When one member of the family is of the Jewish faith, sometime we find they are specifically looking for the Jewish experience for their child. More often, however, [parents] come for the reasons I just shared with you, and they leave expressing that the greatest surprise and wonderful bonus is that they had a faith-based experience.”

NURTURING THE WHOLE CHILD

For faith-based child care, there is often an approach focusing on a child’s holistic development and nurturing all aspects of a family’s life. Both religious instruction and faith-centered values are held in the same regard as children’s social and academic development for the faith-based child care programs that BPC interviewed. Administrators and teachers within the programs expressed that faith-led curriculums are viewed as compatible to the science of early childhood development when implemented with the intention of supporting all aspects of a child’s healthy development.

Whether through religious instruction or principles of faith in a program’s mission and curriculum, the focus on values is deeply aligned with parents’ commitment to their child’s well-being and healthy development. BPC spoke with parents whose children are enrolled in a faith-based preschool in northern Maryland. The reasons they selected the program included academic rigor, spiritual teachings of Christian faith, and the feeling that the teachers cared about their child and gave them—and the parents—specific attention.

“While we do require staff to take a pledge of belief, any parent is welcome in our programs. The most important thing is that children are in a safe and loving environment. We encourage our teachers to start where children are developmentally,” said a program administrator of a national faith-based accrediting organization.

The parents described staff as warm, supportive, involved, personal, and caring within the setting of religious instruction. These sentiments of a welcoming environment that nurtured their child's development were expressed regardless of whether the parents were members of the denomination.

BUSINESS PRACTICES AND PROGRAM STABILITY

Across the sector, child care is a low-revenue industry. The cost to provide child care is more than most families can afford to pay, including public investment from federal and state governments. Like many child care programs across the country, the faith-based organizations we spoke with faced challenges in keeping their child care programs financially solvent, especially during the pandemic. Additionally, they offered widely varying levels of financial and administrative support to their respective child care programs. Opportunities to leverage the capacity of larger faith-based organizational structures were sometimes present, but interviewees dispelled a commonly held and incorrect belief that faith communities are able to provide child care services without external financial support.

On the other hand, some child care programs are providing a source of revenue for a larger faith-based organization, particularly if the child care program uses facilities that are otherwise unoccupied during the work week. Several national leaders shared that the child care programs co-located within a faith-based organization pay rent and utility costs and in some instances, the salaries of parish staff unrelated to the child care program. As the impact of the pandemic continues, faith-based organizations are seeing their budgets stretched thin and some expressed challenges to maintain their child care programs at the same scale. Every organization we interviewed was subject to state-mandated closure orders at the height of the pandemic.

Some child care programs offered that advantages akin to a shared services model for child care business practices exist as a result of their affiliation with a faith-based organization. Shared services create cost efficiencies as they consolidate business operations, centralize back-office functions, eliminate redundancy, and increase purchasing power. A few programs noted they were able to reduce some fixed business costs through their affiliation with a faith-based organization, often when such a faith-based organization offered free physical space or reduced rent, charged a portion of utility costs, or supported backend office functions through the larger faith-based organization.

“I think one of the misconceptions about child care is that the Church is giving agencies money to do this work. That is not how it works. Our agencies raise funding. They write grants. They seek federal contracts. They cannot do this work alone,” said one administrator for a national Catholic social services agency.

For those that received shared resources and benefits, the stabilizing factor was apparent during COVID-19. During the pandemic, one faith-based organization supported the administration of their co-located child care program's successful application to the federal Paycheck Protection Program. Other programs shared their faith-based organizations were able to support acquiring personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies.

POLICY BARRIERS

Most concerns shared with BPC about policy barriers parallel the concerns of the child care sector overall. Low child care subsidy rates that do not cover the cost of providing child care were frequently mentioned as a source financial instability for faith-based child care. As BPC reviewed in our policy brief, [The Limitations of Using Market Rates for Setting Child Care Subsidy Rates](#), states' reliance on market rate surveys is an outmoded methodology that artificially lowers child care subsidy payment rates. This includes faith-based child care programs that serve subsidized families.

Recruiting and retaining a well-trained workforce was frequently cited as a concern among national and state leaders, as well as faith-based child care providers, including those supported with shared resources. Specific faith-based professional development is provided by national faith-based associations, yet is often unrecognized by states as a part of their overall professional development system for educator quality.

Meeting health and safety standards was frequently raised as a mutually-shared goal for faith-based child care. State licensure standards enforcing health and safety measures were noted as being navigable for faith-based child care programs teaching religious instruction for the groups BPC interviewed. Yet, national leaders shared there are significant challenges to navigate where state programs intersect—specifically citing that varying state licensure programs and QRIS are challenging to navigate and communicate licensing issues clearly to families.

Some faith-based child care programs shared that CACFP, the food program subsidizing meals and snacks, had limited flexibility within states to meet cultural and religious food preferences. Participating child care programs must submit a menu to their local CACFP sponsor. One faith-based child care program expressed frustration at not being able to meet the dietary preferences of her children's families whose religions spanned multiple faiths.

REPRESENTATION IN CHILD CARE POLICY ENGAGEMENT

Every interviewee expressed a willingness to engage in policy discussions, but for some faith leaders and faith-based child care program staff, barriers presented limitations to engage at the state and federal level. Barriers cited by those interviewed included a lack of established feedback processes with state and federal policymakers and little representation by faith-based child care on public policy advisory boards and committees, particularly at the state level. Nearly all of those interviewed noted that faith-based child care is under-represented in policymaking conversations.

National associations and organizations representing multiple faith-based child care programs have the largest presence in policy conversations. Smaller faith-based child care programs were eager to participate but found challenges to joining policy conversations—few invitations from government representatives to participate, time restrictions, or lack of use and access to technology to make participation easier.

Recommendations

In order to capture the full extent of faith-based child care's impact on the country's child care market, establishing state and federal policies and practices are necessary to elevate the role of faith-based child care. More data is needed to assist policymakers in understanding the share of faith-based child care in the overall market and to better understand the full picture of parent preferences.

Congress

- Authorize HHS to conduct a study of faith-based child care and categorize the share of the overall child care market.

Federal Agency

- HHS can direct technical assistance to support states in engaging strategies that are inclusive of faith-based child care.

State

- Conduct a statewide assessment of the supply and demand of faith-based child care to understand child care capacity.

- Define and recruit diverse faith-based child care representatives to serve on State Advisory Councils and other stakeholder opportunities.
- Crosswalk faith-based accreditation with QRIS program standards and professional development systems.
- Review state CACFP regulations for compliance with cultural and religious food preference allowance in meal planning.

As reflected in BPC's survey finding that over half, or 53%, of working families using a center-based child care program choose a faith-based child care program, faith-based child care maintains a significant presence in the child care market and enables parent choice.¹⁵ Faith-based child care may also provide the optimal setting for some children's healthy development and learning. The need to cultivate a body of research and expand policy tables to be inclusive of faith-based child care will only serve to strengthen the diversity child care options that best meet the needs of working families and children.

Endnotes

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