



Bipartisan Policy Center

Family Child Care Policy Framework

Overview

Child care provided in home-based settings is a critical component in the overall child care market and encompasses a broad range of child care types—from child care programs that meet state licensing requirements to informal care options such as family members, friends, and neighbors caring for a small number of children. For the purposes of this policy framework, the term “family child care” is used throughout the document and defined as home-based child care providers that appear on a national or state list (see definitions box on page 2).¹

Family child care offers flexibility and convenience for parents with accessible neighborhood locations, a trusted and consistent caregiver, small groups of children, and is a resource for parents who face barriers to accessing child care. For some children, a small learning setting is the optimal environment for their healthy development and provides continuity in child care from infancy to school age. For communities, family child care is an economic and social asset that supports a diverse workforce. During COVID-19, family child care offers specific features that may appeal to parents concerned about health and safety, such as small groups of the same children and very few adults who enter and exit a program on a daily basis.

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For more than a decade, the number of licensed family child care programs significantly declined across the country. To ensure that parent choice is supported and children have opportunities to learn in settings that best suit their developmental needs, policymakers and community leaders must implement solutions at the national, state, and local levels to stabilize and grow family child care. This framework, therefore, does the following to support policy that advances family child care:

- Provides an historical background,
- Demonstrates the impact of policy on family child care,
- Makes the case for sustained investments,
- Outlines the principles that are central to the policies and investments necessary for increasing the nation's family child care capacity, and
- Offers recommendations for policymakers, philanthropy, and the business community to fully support family child care's future.

BACKGROUND ON FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child care provides learning opportunities to mixed-age groups of children, typically between three and 12 children. Present in every community, family child care can meet the needs of parents with limited access to child care, including parents who work nontraditional hours outside of 9 a.m.-5 p.m., live in rural communities,

DEFINITIONS

The 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education defines three types of home-based providers:

1. **Listed:** These providers appear on state or national lists, and include licensed, regulated, license-exempt, and registered home-based providers.
2. **Unlisted paid:** Providers receive payment for the care of at least one child and do not appear on state or national lists.
3. **Unlisted unpaid:** These providers do not receive payment for the care they provide. They include family and friends who may or may not live in the same household as the children they regularly care for. They do not appear on state or national lists.

have infants and toddlers, or have limited English proficiency. For children, the smaller residential environment can foster meaningful relationships in a familiar setting and offer continuity in care from infancy to school age.

Yet licensed family child care is in decline, with small family child care programs with one adult providing care showing a decrease of 13% from 2008-2011 and 24% from 2011-2014.ⁱⁱ This decline is attributed to myriad issues, including low pay, long hours, lack of benefits, isolating work conditions, and an aging workforce. As family child care is the least compensated of all child care types, providers may also leave the field when unemployment rates are low in a community and wages are competitive in other industries.ⁱⁱⁱ While

the child care workforce spans a wide age range, those working in family child care tend to be older than those working in center-based programs, with about 38% of family child care providers over the age of 50, while only 26% of center-based providers are in the same age range.^{iv}

For parents, the decline of family child care represents fewer trusted options. Trust is a predominant factor in parent's child care choices. In a series of national polls conducted by BPC and Morning Consult both prior to COVID-19 and during the pandemic, parents said the most important aspects of a child care provider were safety, trust, quality, caring and qualified staff, and reliability.^{vii} With a single provider, family child care offers a consistent opportunity to establish assured relationships with parents and children. When asked in the BPC-Morning Consult poll, 60% of parents shared they also prefer child care closer to their home.^{vii} Family child care, often located in residential neighborhoods, is part of their social fabric.

An examination of these issues provides a roadmap for where targeted policies, supports, and investments are needed. Family child care is composed of small, independent businesses. Typically, a single family child care provider manages every aspect of the business, including overseeing business processes, health and safety compliance, developmentally appropriate practices for children, and facility maintenance. These expansive responsibilities leave limited time to create business partnerships, expand economies of scale, and participate in training and education, especially

if offered during traditional working hours.



Member of Infant Toddler Family Day Care, VA

The family child care workforce historically has lower levels of formal educational attainment than the center-based workforce. For instance, 52% of center-based providers reported completing an associate degree, bachelor's degree or higher, as compared to 31% of family child care providers.^{viii}

Family child care can access multiple revenue streams, including private payment directly from parents, and federal funding through the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships (EHS-CCP). In some states, family child care providers can also participate in state pre-K programs. In fiscal year 2017, 21% of children receiving CCDF-funded child care were in family child care.^{ix} The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which supports healthy food access in child care programs, is also a significant resource for licensed family child care. In 2017, nearly 757,000 children relied

on meals through CACFP in family child care programs.^x

THE IMPACT OF POLICY ON FAMILY CHILD CARE

Public policies at all levels of government have a significant impact on the fiscal health of family child care. CACFP, as administered by the Department of Agriculture (USDA), subsidizes meals and snacks in participating child care programs. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) established a two-tier structure of CACFP reimbursement rates for family child care. Family child care located in low-income communities or operated by persons with incomes at or below 185% of the Federal poverty guideline are designated Tier 1, and receive reimbursement rates that are comparable to the rates before PRWORA. Family child care that does not meet the low-income criteria are designated as Tier 2. This second tier cut meal reimbursements almost in half for those providers classified as Tier 2.^{xi}

State policies, in particular, have shaped the modern landscape of family child care. For instance, BPC analyzed the 2019-2021 CCDF State Plans—the mechanism states use to apply for federal CCDF funds—and found family child care has the lowest child care subsidy payment rate among all child care program types in all but two states.^{xii} State child care subsidy rates are often paid in set blocks of time as a half or full day of service, even when

family child care provides longer hours of care than center-based child care. Nearly every state uses a market rate survey to determine child care subsidy rates, a flawed methodology that does not capture the actual cost of providing family child care.^{xiii} Market rate surveys typically reflect regional income levels, and not the actual cost of providing care, which serves to keep rates lower in low income regions and exacerbates systemic inequity.^{xiv} The Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014 (CCDBG) allows states to implement a cost-based, alternative methodology for determining child care subsidy rate, a practice that is encouraged by the Office of Child Care to increase the financial stability child care.^{xv}

BPC ANALYZED THE 2019-2021 CCDF STATE PLANS—THE MECHANISM STATES USE TO APPLY FOR FEDERAL CCDF FUNDS—AND FOUND FAMILY CHILD CARE HAS THE LOWEST CHILD CARE SUBSIDY PAYMENT RATE AMONG ALL CHILD CARE PROGRAM TYPES IN ALL BUT TWO STATES.

Additionally, BPC's analysis of the 2019-2021 CCDF State Plans found only 19 states use funding to support a family child care network.^{xvi} Yet even within these 19 states, not all states implement a family child care network with full-time staff, an important factor to a network's implementation and continuity. When implemented successfully, staffed family child care

networks can consolidate business functions, increase economies of scale, and offer peer support among individual providers, as well as receive grants and contracts for child care subsidy payment, a practice shown to stabilize revenues. Staffed networks can also support informal child care in becoming licensed.

Some programs and services for child care overlook family child care's unique structure. State monitoring—including licensing and quality rating and improvement systems—imposes administrative burdens for small providers through uncoordinated site visits, lengthy paperwork, or inconsistent communications. State quality standards often apply program measures intended for a child care center located in a commercial setting onto a family child care's residential setting. For programs that are shown to stabilize child care revenues—such as state pre-K programs and EHS-CCP grants—family child care comprises only a small fraction of slots.

Local policy can also limit the number of family child care providers that are allowed to operate in a region through public housing authority policies and local zoning laws. Local building policies in conflict with state child care

regulations also create confusion and increase fixed costs for family child care providers that operate on minimal revenues. Yet family child

care continues to be a choice for many families, including those looking for smaller child care options that are close to their homes during COVID-19.

THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN FAMILY CHILD CARE

For many communities, family child care is the key to child care access for working parents. In more than 20 states, the majority of licensed child care providers are in homes rather than in centers.^{xvii} Parents cite a number of reasons for choosing family child care including flexible hours, convenient location, lower cost, mixed-age groups that allow siblings to be cared for together, and cultural and linguistic preferences.^{xviii} A key provision of CCDBG requires states to implement strategies to increase the supply and quality of child care programs for specific underserved populations. Bolstering family child care assists states in meeting the CCDBG provision and expands opportunities for children to participate in early learning settings.

Family child care located close to homes and places of work in regions where transportation may be challenging, including rural communities, are suitable factors for parents.^{xix} Younger children may also be more likely to be served in family child care settings. While center-based programs serve primarily children ages three to five, licensed family child care programs serve roughly an equal number of children under three years and children three to five years.^{xx} For



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children, family child care offers individualized, responsive attention. Some children developmentally excel with small groups of children in a home atmosphere that is familiar and comfortable.^{xxi}

IN MORE THAN 20 STATES, THE MAJORITY OF LICENSED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS ARE IN HOMES RATHER THAN IN CENTERS.

Family child care also features a diverse workforce, reflective of the communities' demographics in which programs operate. Diversity within family child care is a programmatic strength for dual-language learners. Research shows that family child care providers are more likely to speak the language of a dual-language child than center-based child care programs.^{xxii}

As family child care operates with a small, consistent staff, the workforce is able to develop stable relationships with children and parents. Children that start in family child care when they are infants may grow up in a program, continuing to use family child care for before and after school care during their school-age years. As COVID-19 continues to impact communities' ability to interact, the dependability of these external relationships will support healthy social-emotional development in children and trust in parents.

In order to implement successful strategies, it is important to acknowledge that the unique structure of family child care represents opportunities for new and expanded policies. The delivery of resources—such as licensing, training, and materials—can be more efficient if individual family child care providers are organized with established distribution channels. Long working hours, sometimes alone or with very limited support staff, mean the family child care workforce needs flexible training, professional development, and higher education coursework offered during nontraditional work hours.

The volume of responsibilities necessary to operate a successful family child care program, including all business aspects of a program's operation, can pull a single provider in many directions. Expert business support and technology access can assist in generating revenues. Family child care lacks a concentrated back-up care option for parents and children, should a provider not be available, whereas a regionally-operated substitute pool can support time off for family child care providers. For these reasons, BPC offers the following principles to guide policy solutions for family child care to thrive in this country.

FAMILY CHILD CARE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. *Family child care is an essential component of the child care landscape and should be recognized in policymaking as such.*

Family child care is essential to ensuring children have an opportunity to participate in early learning settings that suit their development, as some children are better able to succeed in a smaller learning environment. Family child care also supports parents that need child care, and are often small businesses that provide communities with child care options reflective of their values and economy. Family child care is a necessary component of our country's healthy child care market.

2. *Approaching child care with equity includes family child care.*

Family child care is composed of a racially and ethnically diverse workforce that is primarily female.^{xxiii} Family child care also offers a child care option for diverse parents and children, including dual-language learners and children with special needs. In order to support equity for the child care workforce, as well as parents and children, family child care must be included in funding and policy solutions that increase the capacity and stability of the overall child care market.

3. *Family child care is of equal value to center-based child care.*

Too often, family child care is defined by policymakers and community leaders as a lesser option to center-based child care. To support both the CCDBG tenet of parent choice and increase equitable opportunities for all child care workers, family child care should be universally recognized in policy, practice, and communications as an equally-valuable choice for parents seeking child care. Funding and structural supports that are afforded to center-based providers should be accessible to family child care as well.

4. *Family child care requires policies and practices tailored to meet their needs.*

Family child care is operated in a unique structure. Therefore, family child care programs need access to licensing supports, professional development and training, and business practice expertise that specifically meets their needs. Policymakers should review current policies and practices, and include family child care experts in future policymaking decisions.

5. *Family child care is a nexus where all children and families can thrive.*

In order to serve all children appropriately, family child care providers need access to training and services that allow children of all abilities to flourish. Family child care should be networked appropriately with comprehensive community services—such as early intervention, home visiting, and behavioral health support—so that the children and parents can receive a full spectrum of family support services.

6. *Family child care has a distinctive voice that must be included in communications with Congress, state and local policymakers, and advocates.*

To interpret and understand the needs of family child care, family child care should be directly included in discussions about child care policy with Congress, state and local policymakers, and the advocacy community. Family child care is excluded from policy conversations because of technological, communication, and scheduling challenges. Policymakers and advocates can commit to the inclusion of family child care in policy discussions from the beginning of a process, support the development of representative leaders for the family child care community, and identify and dismantle barriers to participation with the help of family child care providers.

7. *As a small business, family child care requires access to technology and back office supports necessary to operate a viable and sustainable business.*

Family child care is often cited for its ability to meet the needs of parents with barriers to access to child care, yet the result low wages and a decreasing workforce. Automated systems and supports aimed at stabilizing program revenues—including full enrollment, collecting all payments and fees, and streamlining administrative functions to reduce time spent on paperwork—coupled with stronger tuition rates can result in improved compensation and better working condition. Improved business support can leverage data to inform cost-based, alternative rate-setting methodologies that target cost drivers unique to family child care—such as mixed age groups, flexible hours, health care costs, rental market rates, and facilities improvements.

MULTI-SECTOR RESPONSIBILITY FOR FAMILY CHILD CARE

Family child care is an essential component of the child care landscape that benefits many working families, children, and communities. COVID-19 has exacerbated issues that impact the fragility of the entire child care market, yet there is opportunity to ensure that family child care is supported and recognized as the valuable service it is.

The philanthropic sector, the business community, as well as federal, state, and local governments can each play a distinct role and share responsibility in creating and implementing policies that support family child care in communities across the country.

Congressional Recommendations

- Invest in staffed family child care networks that include both business and pedagogical leadership, and provide economies of scale and distribution channels for supplies both during COVID-19 and after.
- Support funding so every family child care provider is able to both purchase technology to run their business and have broadband or high-speed mobile network access.
- Expand, authorize, and improve EHS-CCP to offer long-term support and stabilization for family child care programs.

- Include family child care in community, economic development, and infrastructure funding, including support for women and minority owned businesses, access to technology, and grants and loans for facilities improvement.
- Reform CACFP to better support family child care providers, including to reduce administrative barriers, enable electronic reporting and accountability, set all reimbursement levels at tier 1 for participants, and reduce the tax burden of CACFP reimbursement.

Federal Agency Recommendations

- HHS can elevate available technical assistance experts in family child care and coordinate expertise in business practices, child care subsidy, licensing, quality, and state systems. Ensure that experts have skills in both business and pedagogical leadership.
- HHS is encouraged to develop a family child care research agenda and dedicate federal research dollars through the Office of Research, Planning, and Evaluation and the Office of Head Start. The research agenda should specifically focus on promoting quality, business strength and longevity, and sufficient income for family child care. Federal research dollars could also be used to help states evaluate their initiatives.
- HHS can highlight lessons learned from EHS-CCP implementation, potential for tax strategies to strengthen family child care businesses, and how to calculate appropriate compensation and methods of financing in the family child care field.

State Recommendations

- Shift from paying family child care based on market prices to a cost-based, alternative rate-setting methodology based on cost modeling. Explore contracts or grants for slots with a staffed family child care network.
- Elevate family child care as an essential small business through cross-agency planning, including programs for business assistance, economic development, and community lending. Include family child care in state plans for the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Community Services Block Grant Program.
- Evaluate existing data, including from Preschool Development Grant needs assessments and Head Start community needs assessments, and analyze supply and demand data to determine targeted investments for staffed family child care networks.
- Expand state funding opportunities for pre-K slots in child care programs to include family child care.
- Develop cross-agency education solutions for family child care that spans from community and technical education to higher education. Grow the workforce readiness of family child care with specialized higher education coursework.
- Fund technology start-up costs and technical assistance for technology use, and link to subsidy billing automated child management system.
- Ensure that State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems are relevant and accessible to family child care. Retain and recruit new family

child care providers through targeted strategies, such as peer mentoring through staffed family child care networks, family child care campaigns, and support for the development and expansion of family child care associations.

- Incentivize family child care businesses in state affordable housing plans.

Local Recommendations

- Review local zoning laws and public housing authority policies to ensure they do not prohibit family child care, align local building practices with state child care facilities regulations, and address practices of banning family child care in rental buildings and subsidized housing.
- Invest in accessible workforce development programs, such as registered apprenticeships, through local workforce development boards.
- Incentivize and champion family child care as a target for local business investment, and partner with regional and local chambers of commerce to elevate family child care as a small business.
- Enable free or low-cost broadband or high-speed mobile network access to family child care programs.
- Include family child care in policy opportunities, including emergency and community planning.
- Include family child care providers in local children's cabinets or early childhood task forces.
- Fund technical assistance on local building code standards and other approvals that are needed to start and license a family child care program.

- Encourage stronger collaborations between school districts and family child care to ease transition to kindergarten and encourage use of family child care for before and after school care.

State and Local Cross-Agency Recommendations

- Align monitoring policies and procedures related to quality and health and safety both across state agencies and from local-to-state levels—including fire safety, State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems, CCDF, CACFP, and EHS-CCP.
- Support state and local monitoring and licensing agents with appropriate, aligned training that is relevant to family child care.
- Commit to increasing the inclusion of young children with diverse needs and eliminating the potential for harsh discipline by ensuring family child care has access to dual language learner supports, early intervention, behavioral health resources, coaching and mentoring, and peer networking.
- Review existing programs and services targeting child care across local and state government specifically for family child care, such as licensing, quality supports, and business development. Ensure programs and services are culturally competent and accessible to dual language communities.

Private/Philanthropic Recommendations

- Invest in policy and advocacy expertise specific to family child care. Support professional associations representing family child care and other organizing practices that empower the voice of the family child care provider.
- Invest in a multi-sector effort that spans family child care professionals, business experts, and policymakers that clearly defines family child care as a small business and offers avenues to entrepreneurship and small business development for family child care providers.
- Support staffed family child care networks that include both business and pedagogical leadership, along with state-of-the-art technological tools.
- Fund partnerships between small business human resources and family child care networks to encourage working parent employees to select family child care programs.
- Foster relationships with community lenders and business experts to support access to small business loans and community grants for family child care.

Signatories



ALL OUR KIN



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Endnotes

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