

Child Care Facilities: Quality Matters

With 15 million children under age 6 living in households in which all parents work, many families are in need of high-quality child care.¹ The environments in which children learn, play, and grow are critical to shaping their development, so it is important that these spaces are both safe and developmentally appropriate. The physical infrastructure of many child care settings, however, has been long neglected, and many parents must decide between leaving the workforce or placing their children in substandard care. High-quality environments can lead to better outcomes for children, and it is critical to recognize that our nation's children cannot wait for greater investments in child care infrastructure that supports their development.

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

States play an important role in ensuring child care facilities keep young children safe and healthy. Yet, even when child care programs are regulated, environmental hazards that harm children's development are dangerously present, including well-documented hazards such as lead and asbestos. In fact, only 11 states require licensed child care facilities to test their drinking water for lead: California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.² And despite decades of research establishing the connection between asbestos exposure and chronic illness, only a third of states address asbestos in their laws and regulations for child care.³ To keep children safe, states should develop policies to reduce the presence of lead in the drinking water, asbestos, radon, carbon monoxide, water damage, and mold in child care facilities.

FACILITY DESIGN AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The environments in which young children learn, play, and grow directly shape their development, especially during their earliest years. Access to safe, high-quality, and developmentally appropriate settings and equipment—child-sized fixtures, appropriate acoustics and lighting, and dedicated spaces for play and engagement with others—helps promote children's healthy behaviors and independence. Investments that help providers exceed minimal health and safety requirements will result in strong outcomes for children.

- 1** Child-sized toilets, sinks, and other fixtures help children build competence, independence, and good hygiene practices. Toilet training is a learning experience for all young children. Without size-appropriate fixtures in child care facilities, young children will not learn how to use the bathroom independently. Similarly, child-height sinks allow young children to wash their hands independently, helping them develop good habits.
- 2** Bathrooms adjacent to classrooms and playgrounds help build autonomy for children and allow the teacher to closely monitoring bathroom activities. When bathrooms are adjacent to classrooms, young children can walk to the bathroom independently while still in sight of a teacher. Shared bathrooms between classrooms can reduce facility costs.
- 3** Classrooms and common areas have windows to the outside world. Windows provide young children natural light and allow them to orient themselves to the outside world. Young children can also better observe weather, seasons, and different times of day.
- 4** Acoustics and noise levels are appropriate for the development of young children. Noise levels can have negative effects on children's memory, attention, and academic achievement. Conditions of facility space—including surface type, room size, and ceiling height—impact the acoustics and should be considered during the design process.
- 5** Playgrounds and outdoor spaces allow young children to connect with nature. Research shows that a child's connection to the environment can lead to reduced rates of child obesity, depression, and attention deficit disorder. It can also promote creative thinking and problem-solving skills. When playgrounds are designed, they should accommodate different activity types, including group and individual activities as well as dramatic play.
- 6** Entryways, common areas, and hallways are intentional spaces for early learning and development. These areas can provide transitional space when moving from one room to another, and if large enough, can be used as multipurpose spaces to promote gross motor skills and interactions with other children, parents, and teachers. Entryways provide a space for young children to observe activity before separating from parents.
- 7** Early learning facilities are comfortable and homelike. Facilities with warm, soothing colors; open spaces; and different types of lighting are more inviting for both parents and children. Further, spaces that resemble a child's home may promote self-expression.

The Takeaway

The conditions of child care facilities—both center-based and home-based child care—have an impact on children’s development. The physical infrastructure of these spaces, however, is a component of quality that is often overlooked. Greater investments should be made in child care facility improvements so children can learn, play, and grow in safe, healthy, and developmentally appropriate settings.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Census Bureau, 2014-2018 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Public Use Micro Sample.
2. Environmental Defense Fund, 2019, “Child Care Lead in Water Requirements.” Available at: <https://www.edf.org/health/child-care-lead-water-requirements>.
3. 276 Environmental Law Institute, 2015, “Reducing Environmental Exposures in Child Care Facilities: A Review of State Policy.” Available at: https://www.eli.org/sites/default/files/eli-pubs/reducing-environmental-exposures-child-care_4.pdf.