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Child Care Subsidies Boost Quality of Care for Some But Not All

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Child Care Subsidies: Do They Impact The Quality of Care Children Experience?

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The federally funded child care subsidy program is among the government's biggest investments in the early care and education of low-income children. A new study has found that subsidies have the potential to enhance the quality of child care low-income children receive, but parents who use the subsidies aren't necessarily accessing the highest quality of care available to them.

The study, conducted at Georgetown University and Columbia University, appears in the journal *Child Development*.

"Among all children who were eligible for child care subsidies, those who used the subsidies received lower quality care than those whose primary arrangement was instead a Head Start or a public prekindergarten program," according to Anna D. Johnson, postdoctoral research fellow in the department of psychology at Georgetown University, who led the study. Johnson and her colleagues believe that's because "Head Start and public prekindergarten programs were designed specifically to boost children's development by providing higher quality care. Their quality is, on average, higher than that of the community-based centers and home-based care that are used by subsidy recipients."

The researchers used data, drawn from the nationally representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, that included a subsample of 750 4-year-olds whose parents were eligible for child care subsidies because they met income and work requirements. They compared the developmental quality of the child care settings used by parents who received subsidies to that of parents who were eligible for subsidies but didn't receive them, according to the type of care used by the latter group.

Parents who got subsidies received higher quality care only in comparison to parents who didn't get subsidies and used unsubsidized care. Parents who got subsidies were more likely to use center-based care than parents who didn't get subsidies, and center-based care was, on average, higher in quality than home-based care.

Among those families using home-based care, those who got subsidies used higher quality care than those who didn't get subsidies. This suggests that perhaps subsidies allow parents who prefer home-based care to select settings that are licensed or regulated and are thus higher in quality than unlicensed care provided by a family member, friend, or neighbor.

“Increasing access to subsidies so that eligible families have more options may provide an additional avenue through which public policy can increase the quality of child care for low-income children,” Johnson notes.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 83, Issue 5, Child Care Subsidies: Do They Impact The Quality of Care Children Experience? by Johnson, AD, Ryan, RM (Georgetown University), and Brooks-Gunn, J (Columbia University). Copyright 2012 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.