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## Early Childhood Professional Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research

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# Research & Policy Brief

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## Early Childhood Professional Development: A Synthesis of Recent Research

### Introduction

The skills of early child care providers have been shown to influence how well child care experiences meet the needs of young children and the overall quality of this care. One influence on the skills of providers is their formal and informal training and education. The term professional development refers to all types of facilitated learning opportunities, both formal educational opportunities that result in awarding credit and informal training activities delivered to in-service early child care providers (NPDCI, 2008). Professional development can include a wide range of learning activities, including formal higher education, a variety of training workshops and activities, relationship-based training, and support through compensation, retention initiatives and other forms of financial support, such as scholarships (Weber and Trauten, 2008). This literature review explores the current status of research on the impacts of investments in different types of professional development in early child care settings.

### Professional development impacts the quality of early child care

Research over the last ten years indicates that caregiver education and training programs may be associated with more positive early child care outcomes, such as increased positive interactions between adults and children and improvements in a range of child developmental areas. However, the body of literature remains generally inconclusive about which professional development programs are more effective than others. A lack of common measures, few comparative studies, and non-generalizable program assessments complicate findings. While the literature may not provide conclusive knowledge, it does provide some insight into which professional development efforts have, in at least limited arenas, had a positive impact on child care:

- *Education Level:* A provider's education level has been shown widely to have a positive impact on child care quality outcomes. Recent studies have not shown additional improvements in quality beyond the bachelor's degree and some studies have begun to show little impact beyond an Associate's degree. The most recent literature indicates that while the experience of having gone to school for a bachelor's degree may improve quality outcomes, specifically earning a degree in early childhood education may not.
- *College Credit:* Offering college credit for professional development has been shown widely to increase child care quality, especially when combined with technical assistance.
- *Trainings:* One of the most significant findings in recent years is that while training workshops are consistently the professional development method of preference by caregivers, short-term, one-time trainings have little or no impact on

### Fast Facts

- Identifying *single* predictors of improvements from professional development continues to be inconclusive.
- New research identifies 14 key indicators of quality with eight or more working *in combination* that predicts quality child care.
- To have the greatest effect, professional development should support a variety of activities rather than one specific type.

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quality improvements. In contrast, longer-term, continuous and intensive trainings have shown significant gains in quality. Trainings with clear, focused, tailored, manualized trainings and training that is embedded in caregivers' jobs, involving their supervisor and facility have been related to increased quality outcomes. Initial studies show that trainings integrating demonstration of child care approaches onsite in real-life circumstances followed by intense practice may also result in quality gains.

- *Relationship-based Training Efforts*: A new area of study is finding that coaching, consultation, technical assistance and mentoring programs may also have greater impact than traditional training methods. These all include efforts to provide the caregiver one-on-one interaction with trained mentors and other professionals. While new literature indicates great promise for relationship-based training efforts, studies are far from conclusive and offer little in the way of showing advantages of one over another.

- *Compensation, Retention Initiatives and Scholarships*: Although there is not enough literature in this area to determine the level of effectiveness or specific program content required to be effective, compensation, retention initiatives and scholarships have each been shown in a limited number of studies to be successful in getting participants to increase their levels in state registries and to complete certificate and degree programs.

- *Other Influences on Professional Development Outcomes*: Studies have also shown that a caregiver's purpose for pursuing professional development may influence outcomes and that the effectiveness of any type of professional development can differ between types of care settings.

### **No Single Predictor of Quality: Investment in Multiple Areas Needed to Have Impact**

The literature indicates that there is not one, clear predictor of child care quality. However, recent studies have taken a new cumulative approach to measuring predictors of quality. Early childhood researchers Zaslow and Martinez-Beck (2001) advocate for a cumulative approach to predicting quality. They identify that there are actually 14 key indicators of quality and that it takes eight or more of these indicators in combination to create

a critical mass that predicts good quality child care. Six of these indicators are related to education and training: child development associate (yes/no), training hours, use of a curriculum, conference attendance, intense training, and education level.

### **Policy Implications**

These findings indicate that investments should be made in a range of professional development activities, instead of all in one area. They also show that investments need to be made in research designed to create more accurate measures of professional development program impacts. In academia and practitioner circles, researchers should also look to integrate new common measures in their efforts to evaluate professional development efforts.

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