

Quality Early Education and Child Care

Quality counts. As pediatricians, we know that nurturing and developmentally stimulating environments are critical for early brain development and school readiness. But quality also costs, and child care is a significant cost for most families. Schools are typically free for children over the age of five, but when their children are younger than five, parents are responsible for the costs. Did you ever wonder why parents pay the most to educate their children when they are at the lowest point of their earning potential? Did you know that the average child care worker wages are on par with parking lot attendants or manicurists? With low wages and high turnover rates in child care staff, it is difficult to provide quality child care. Research shows that very few child care centers provide high quality care; most care in the U.S. is mediocre at best.

With the current budgetary limitations, we are not likely to see dramatic changes in these realities, but until childhood education is seen as a continuum and not something that starts at age five, how can we help parents choose quality child care settings for their infants and children?

We know that most parents choose child care based on geography, cost, and personal preference. We need to encourage parents to think about quality indicators such as staff to child ratios, safety practices, director qualifications, and handwashing and other sanitation practices. Parents should ask whether the child care center or family child care home is licensed or accredited. They should ask about the center's policies regarding medication administration, illness, and how injuries are handled. Parents should be encouraged to visit child care facilities to get a sense of the caregiver/teacher communication methods and the educational curriculum. Parents can also look at playground equipment, food preparation areas, and diapering facilities.

As pediatricians, we need to identify community resources that can help parents find quality programs. State-funded programs called Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies are a great resource - these agencies are charged with helping parents evaluate their child care options and typically offer trainings for child care providers. They

provide lists of licensed centers and homes, and provide education about quality indicators. See www.childcareaware.org for more information about quality child care and a way to search for the closest Child Care Resource and Referral agency by zip code.

The National Association of Early Childhood Educators (NAEYC) offers an online search mechanism that allows parents to search by zip code to identify accredited child care centers at www.naeyc.org. The National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care website includes all state child care licensing regulations and many other resources at <http://nrc.uchsc.edu/> (or call 800/598-KIDS).

To find out more about these issues, read the new AAP policy statement, “Quality Early Education and Child Care,” check out the AAP Web site www.healthychildcare.org or contact AAP child care staff at 847/434-4915 or hcca@aap.org. We have an opportunity to help parents make some difficult decisions that will impact on their children’s development and health. We may not be able to walk the road for them, but we can at least point out the way.