

How Are the Children? The children are well cared for!

Written by Mary Ellin Logue and Sandy Phoenix

We are in a childcare crisis in Maine and across the country. It's not a new thing, but the pandemic has increased awareness about how hard it is for parents to work when they don't have access to safe, affordable childcare. Even the best centers have trouble hiring and keeping good teachers. With low salaries, no relief for college loans, and few-if-any-benefits, fewer people are choosing early childhood education as careers. The skill and knowledge involved in providing high quality care is expensive in a system that relies primarily on parents' fees to fund childcare.



Still, the debate is over. **Decades of research show that when children have “high quality” early childhood experiences, their social, academic and language development is supported and protected.** With quality experiences, they are less likely to need Special Education services, drop out of school, experience early pregnancy, or enter the criminal justice system. This is especially true for children from high poverty backgrounds. At a financial and social return-of-investment (ROI) of 13%, the long-term investment is worth the cost!

We want all children to be healthy and productive members of our community. We all want our children to spend time in settings where they are nurtured, stimulated and encouraged. We now know a lot about how children's early education affects their achievement in school and throughout their lives. We know what high-quality childcare looks like.

Our state licenses childcare centers and family childcare homes with a minimum standard of quality to protect children's health, safety and learning. Licensing is necessary, but still not enough to support children's learning. We know that sometimes, when there are no licensed centers available, that parents have to make other arrangements. Many families are forced to make decisions based on cost, distance to home, or flexibility with work hours. In an ideal world, all children would be able to attend nationally-accredited programs—but in reality, very few do. If these options are not available or affordable, what are parents to do? Families are struggling enough without adding a layer of guilt for things they can't control.

Children do not need perfect parents, but they do need “good enough” parents. The same is true for early education. We know that children need adults to respond lovingly and give them opportunities throughout the day to engage in “serve and return” conversations that spur their language and thinking. Children need caregivers who appreciate the differences in their styles of being in the world (temperament), and they need to explore and learn about the world around them.

In the now famous Abercederian Project, researchers followed children's progress over thirty years, into adulthood, and showed that important, long-lasting benefits are associated with high-quality early childhood programs. Although not every community can offer such well-rounded programs, they identified certain criteria that really make a difference. These criteria apply whether a child is at home with a family member, neighbor, or in a childcare center. **These criteria, or characteristics, are called “priming mechanisms” because, just like priming a pump, they protect and encourage healthy development and learning.**

- Physical safety**—Is there enough room (inside and outside) for the number of children to explore and play? Are meals and snacks nutritious? Is the environment free from hazards? Do the adults have plans for handling sick children and know what to do in the event of an emergency?
- Safe exploration**—Are there enough opportunities for children to do interesting things and have a variety of experiences day-to-day?
- Celebrations**—Just because children might be of a similar age, their skills and development are different. Is every child celebrated for their effort and for the baby steps toward mastering something new, like a developmental milestone or a new skill?
- Opportunities to practice**—None of us are born knowing how to do the things we know. We learn through repeated practice. Are there chances to try again? Are children allowed extra time to repeat a success over or to practice with encouragement from an adult or older child?
- Conversation and rich language**—Do adults talk to the children? Do adults explain difficult words or concepts or do they shy away from language that is “over the child’s head”? Do the adults read to children, tell them stories and sing? Are children encouraged to “have their says”.
- Respect and positive regard**—Are children made to feel special? Do adults smile at them and play and wonder with them? When children hear their names, are they said with respect and caring?
- Protection from inappropriate disapproval, teasing or punishment**—Are adults aware of bullying? What happens when a child misbehaves or refuses to cooperate?
- Mentoring basic skills**—The children who will be most successful in school enter school having had more face-to-face conversations. They can count because they count the steps as they go up and down or the crackers on their snack plates. They learn to wait for a turn and to share with others. These skills can be built into everyday interactions and help children succeed.
- Guidance and limitation**—What happens when children are out of control? Do adults stop children, explain what’s wrong, and provide ways the child can correct a situation, or do they yell, humiliate and punish?
- Modeling social and emotional skills**—Are the teachers able to teach or “model” positive ways of speaking and behavior between children or with children and their parents?
- Adults’ needs are met**—We know that stability of the childcare setting is a key factor in protecting children’s development. If we don’t pay attention to the adults’ needs for fair wages, recognition, opportunities to learn, and support from others, we will not have the “good enough” environments we need for families to raise healthy and happy children.

We need to recognize that while we’re in a period where there is not enough quality childcare and early education for every child who needs it, we can keep working toward more and better options for families.

What’s good for babies and young children is good for our community. Let’s all strive to be “good enough” parents, friends, neighbors, extended family, and caring community members through practicing the “priming mechanisms” that support child and community wellbeing.

Resources for you:

<https://www.wonderschool.com/p/child-care-provider-resources/early-childhood-education/> Short, well written article explaining the benefits of quality early childhood education.

<https://mrtq.org> Maine Roads to Quality professional development for early care and education

Sandra Phoenix APRN-C, MPH is a family nurse practitioner and Healthy Peninsula Board member. Mary Ellin Logue, EdD is Professor Emerita, Early Childhood Education, University of Maine. The How Are the Children? campaign is funded through a grant from the Maine Community Foundation to Healthy Peninsula, in partnership with School Unions 76 and 93, early child educators, health providers, and community organizations and services. Your Health Matters is a health column by Healthy Peninsula and the Northern Light Blue Hill Hospital.