



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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Two New Issue Briefs Explore Ingredients of High Quality Early Learning Programs Research Shows Group Size, Staff-Child Ratios and Strong Curriculum are Keys to Quality

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families today released two new policy briefs on early childhood education. The briefs focus on two key ingredients of high-quality early learning programs: staff-child ratios and curriculum. These briefs are the final two installments in a five-part “Quality Matters” series that reviews relevant research, examines what we know about the quality of Wisconsin early childhood programs, and explores implications for public policy.

The first brief, “Small is Beautiful: Staff-Child Ratios and Group Size,” summarizes the available research on the impact of group size and teacher-to-child ratios on program quality. Small group sizes and low ratios of children to adults allow staff to be more responsive to each child’s needs. While Wisconsin’s early childhood programs appear to have ratio and group size standards in a reasonable range, research suggests that it makes sense to focus on strengthening standards for programs serving children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The second brief, “Getting Ready: Curriculum Elements for Early Learning,” focuses on the important role development of an intentional curriculum can play in enhancing the quality of early learning programs. Because the brain develops at an astonishing rate during the first five years of life, a curriculum that provides the kind of stimulation that promotes healthy brain development is an important ingredient in a strong early learning program. This brief explores the wide range of standards and practices in Wisconsin’s early childhood programs, and recommends a particular focus on low-income children served by the Wisconsin Shares child care subsidy program.

Over 70 percent of Wisconsin’s children under age 6 have all available parents in the workforce, one of the highest rates in the nation. Our children are increasingly in out-of-home settings so that their parents can work. Over 60,000 children currently participate in the Wisconsin Shares subsidy program. “Targeting this group of children for enhanced early learning and development would be a sensible first step toward making sure that every child in the state has a great start,” said Charity Eleson, executive director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families. “We currently invest well over \$300 million annually to help low-income working families pay for child care, and we have an opportunity to use those funds to leverage improvements in quality for children throughout the state.”

“Ensuring that our children have great early learning experiences is one of the very best investments our state can make,” said Christie Howell-Yrios, director of Animal Crackers, Inc. Childcare, Preschool and Afterschool Program in Madison. "A high quality child care program supports parents and helps children develop the foundation for success in school and life."

“A child's brain develops at an extraordinary rate in the first five years,” said Chris Holmes, president of Penfield Children's Center in Milwaukee. “A well-designed program implemented by qualified staff makes an enormous difference in a child’s development and readiness for school.”

“Small is Beautiful” is available online at
http://www.wccf.org/pdf/small_ratio_group_ece_spring_2008.pdf

“Getting Ready” is at http://www.wccf.org/pdf/curriculum_early_learning_fall_2008.pdf