

**What is Family-Friendly Child Care
and Why Does It Matter?
What Parents and Providers Say –
and the Implications for Quality Care**

Executive Summary



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Introduction

Funded by IBM and conducted by WFD Consulting, the Family-Friendly Child Care Project is a multi-phased effort to increase awareness and understanding of the child care needs of working families. The goals of the project are to equip working parents with ways to identify high-quality centers and to equip child care centers with ways to provide care that best meets the needs of the families they serve. Towards that end, a project was designed to define the elements of a family-friendly child care program.

In child care, “family friendly” means adopting policies and practices that create a true collaboration between families and staff with the well-being of the child as the focus. A family-friendly program is family-centric; it operates on the premise that families are the center of children’s lives and puts family needs ahead of the convenience of the child care program. Family-friendly centers exhibit a culture of strong support for families, a focus on parent involvement and participation in the center in ways that are feasible for the families enrolled, and an emphasis on the myriad *relationships* that result in the best possible experience for the children enrolled at the center. Quality is a pre-requisite for family friendliness; unless the elements of quality care are in place, family friendliness matters little.

With this basic definition of “family friendly” in mind, a study was designed to identify the features of a family-friendly program that are important to working families. The study design called for a survey of parents and staff at child care centers in three regions of the United States. In addition to probing the key components of family-friendly care, the study investigated the impact of high-quality, family-friendly child care on staff who work at child care centers and on parents as employees. That is, are staff at high-quality, family-friendly centers more satisfied with their jobs? Do parents who use family-friendly child care centers feel better able to manage their work and personal responsibilities? A final aspect of the study design was to create a streamlined survey tool that would enable child care centers to self-assess the family friendliness of their programs and services, and serve as a guideline for parents seeking high-quality care or seeking to improve the quality of their current care arrangement.

Methodology

A questionnaire – the Family-Friendly Child Care Audit Tool – was developed to explore the following six dimensions of family friendliness:

- A child-centered place (probing the relationships and connections between teachers and children);
- A parent-centered place (probing the relationships and connections between teachers and parents concerning the well-being of the child);
- A place that builds quality relationships with families (probing how welcome and included parents feel);
- A place that respects the diverse families and cultures it serves;
- A place that anticipates and responds to the needs of families; and
- A place that communicates with families by a variety of means.

Additional questions measured basic quality elements of the center (the ratio of teachers to children, the quality of the developmental program, and the training/experience level of staff), job satisfaction levels among center staff, and issues of work/life conflict for parents.

The survey was fielded to administrators, teachers, and parents at 63 for-profit and non-profit child care centers in Los Angeles, Dallas, and New York City. In all, 5,603 surveys were sent and 2,530 returned, for a response rate of 45%. A full report detailing the methodology and findings of the study is available on the American Business Collaboration (ABC) web site: www.abcdifferentcare.com.¹

Defining Family Friendliness

Results were analyzed separately for parents and for staff to determine if they define family friendliness differently. For both groups, basic elements of child care quality proved to be important in the analysis. Once quality is accounted for, parents value several components as contributing to the family friendliness of the center. These include: the emphasis on the quality of staff/child relationships and staff/parent interactions; the sense of partnership and mutual support at the center as evidenced in strong relationships between parents and staff (particularly in non-profit centers); the respect demonstrated by staff towards parents which reflects staff's appreciation of the unique nature of each family; the ability of staff to respond to the needs of families by offering information, programs, and services to assist them; and a high degree of communication as well as a variety of communication channels (particularly in for-profit centers). Additionally, parents associate hours that care is offered with family friendliness. Cost is a factor in family friendliness, as well, but only in lower quality centers.

Staff are more limiting in their definition of family friendliness than parents. For them, family friendliness means developing quality relationships with parents and responding to their needs by offering information, programs, and services to assist them. They also associate respect for the uniqueness and diversity of families with family friendliness (particularly in for-profit centers). Staff appear to have a more traditional

¹ The American Business Collaboration (ABC) is a groundbreaking collaboration of leading U.S. companies partnering to ensure that their employees have access to quality dependent care programs and services to help them manage their work and personal responsibilities. The basic principle guiding the ABC is the belief that companies can accomplish more by working together than by working alone.

perspective of family friendliness: including parents in governance, offering some set of programs or services to respond to parents' needs, and being respectful of the make-up of the family. Like parents, staff associate hours that care is offered with family friendliness.

Table 1 displays the six family-friendly elements and the factors important to parents and staff:

Table 1. Family-Friendly Factors of Importance to Parents and Staff

	Parents	Staff
Staff/Child Relationship Scale	X	
Staff/Parent Interaction Scale	X	
Quality of Staff/Family Relationships Scale	X	X
Respect for Diverse Families and Cultures Scale	X	X
Responsiveness to Family Needs Scale	X	X
Communication Scale	X	

Parents define family friendliness more broadly than staff, identifying all six family-friendly factors as important compared to staff who define family friendliness along three dimensions only. Because parents have a broader definition of family friendliness than staff, centers can better serve families by expanding their thinking about how best to deliver care and services. The Family-Friendly Audit Tool, available on the ABC website, identifies the particular behaviors, programs, services, and practices that parents associate with family friendliness.

Business Impacts on Center Operations

To investigate the relationship between staff satisfaction and the family friendliness of the center, the study looked at three staff questions: satisfaction with their job, willingness to work at their center if they were looking for work again, and willingness to recommend their center to others looking for work. The study found a positive correlation between staff satisfaction and center quality/family-friendliness. That is, higher ratings of quality and family friendliness are associated with higher job satisfaction among staff. This relationship is somewhat stronger among teachers than administrators. Because greater job satisfaction typically translates into reduced staff turnover, the findings suggest that family friendliness is part of a reinforcing loop of high quality – satisfied teachers stay in their jobs thus sustaining the continuity of relationships with children and families. In addition, reduced turnover means that centers have lower operating costs because they encumber fewer staff replacement expenses, and they differentiate themselves in the market as more desirable centers because their staff and administration are stable.

Impacts for Parents' Employers

To understand how family-friendly child care might benefit parents' employers, the study probed parents' ability to manage their work and family responsibilities as well as their incidence of breakdowns in meeting work responsibilities. In examining the correlation between quality/family-friendliness of child care and parental work/life stress,

a small negative effect was found. That is, parents who use high-quality, family-friendly centers are somewhat more likely to report reduced stress and better concentration at work. In terms of specific work/family conflicts, parents who use high-quality, high family-friendly centers differ from those using lower quality, less family-friendly child care centers in these ways: fewer instances of inability to work overtime/extra hours, fewer instances of leaving work early or arriving late, and fewer instances of missing an important meeting. High quality/family-friendly care, then, seems not only good for children and parents, but good for employers as well.

Communication and Services of Value to Parents

Communication is one of the hallmarks of a family-friendly center. Parents indicate that they highly value a wide range of communication methods. The methods receiving the highest ratings are those most likely to be in place at centers: written notices posted in places like cubbies or on doors to children's rooms, conversations at drop-off and pick-up times, individualized written notes, and individual parent conferences. Several other types of communication are highly valued and should be considered by centers not currently offering them: video or photos of activities at the center, packets of take-home information, and telephone communication with parents.

The study inquired about various services that might be offered by their child care center and asked parents to indicate the value of services *not currently offered*. The top five services that parents would value are:

- Information on community activities for children and families (94%);
- Information on support services for families (89%);
- Computers with software for children (85%);
- Enrichment classes (for a fee) such as dance, martial arts, music, or gymnastics (79%); and
- Flexible payment plans (79%).

These convenience services fell to the bottom of the list:

- Fax and photocopy machines (22%);
- Take-home meals (22%); and
- Dry cleaning drop off/pick-up (20%).

These findings help to dispel the notion that family friendliness means convenience services for parents. The study found instead that parents prefer programs that enhance the care experience for their child as well as services that address their more substantive needs as a family.

Conclusion

While the value of high-quality, family-friendly care seems clear, its execution should depend on the unique culture and circumstances of each center. The factors that emerged in the analysis can serve as guidelines for how centers might define family friendliness, but local parent feedback and center resources need to be taken into

account. Centers that add new services will need to be sure that they do not reduce the quality of the services to the children and their families by expecting the same staff to provide all the new services.

It is hoped that the Family-Friendly Audit Tool will be used by centers to stimulate discussion and lead to improvements in meeting the needs of today's working families. Perhaps its most valuable use is in identifying specific gaps that may exist between staff and parents in awareness of services and presence of behaviors that parents and staff associate with family friendliness. When asked what parents value, centers might be surprised to learn that it is not necessarily specialty services that they want, but rather an emphasis on how parents and teachers can be mutually supportive in meeting the needs of the child. Focus groups with parents may help to illuminate findings in a particular center.

Efforts to improve family friendliness can only be successful if two elements are in place. The first is the existence of high-quality care as defined by ratio, quality of program, and training/experience level of staff. The second element is a commitment from program administrators to set the tone, allocate appropriate resources, commit in-service training time, and modify the performance review system to ensure that family friendliness becomes integrated into the culture of the center and the behaviors of the staff.

Next Steps

Originally intended as a project to inform parents and child care center staff, the results of the Family-Friendly Child Care Center Study prove to be broader in their reach, with implications for multiple audiences. Beyond parents and child care center staff, the results will be useful to early childhood researchers and educators, professional organizations, and employers. It is hoped that these many audiences will use the findings to improve their delivery of services, contribute further to the field, and/or make more informed decisions when seeking to identify high-quality, family-friendly child care. The points below illustrate some of the ways the findings might be useful.

Child Care Center Staff. Confirming what prior research has indicated and conventional wisdom supports, centers must focus first on the basic elements of quality care – including ratio, quality of the developmental program, and the training/experience level of staff – in order to meet the needs of families who use their center. To better serve their clients, the study argues for centers to enhance the quality of care by adding a family-friendliness component. The audit tool points to specific behaviors, services, activities, and programs that parents associate with family friendliness.

Parents. Parents can use the findings of the study – and the audit tool items in particular – to expand their thinking about what is possible to expect from a high-quality, family-friendly center. When selecting a center, parents can include the attributes described in the study among their evaluation criteria. For parents already using a center, the study empowers them to raise issues of family friendliness with center staff, offering a tool to help initiate the process and facilitate dialogue.

Early Childhood Educators and Researchers. The study provides early childhood educators with specific attributes to understand and explain the concept of family friendliness as an enhancement to traditional notions of quality child care. With the definitions provided in this study as well as the compelling nature of the findings, educators can integrate the concept of family-friendly care into the curriculum to improve the training of future providers.

Professional Organizations. Organizations such as the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRAA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) should continue to support a definition of quality child care that includes those elements identified by parents as contributing to family friendliness. The study's evidence that high-quality, family-friendly centers tend to have more satisfied staff as well as parents who are better able to manage their work and family responsibilities, makes the case for an inclusive definition.

Employers. For employers at large, the study confirms previous findings that the use of quality child care is associated with reduced stress for working parents, in this case expanding the definition of quality to include family friendliness. Additionally, the study confirms that high-quality, family-friendly child care is associated with fewer work conflicts such as inability to work overtime, leaving work early or arriving late, and missing important meetings. Many employers already provide dependent care programs that help parents locate high-quality child care and/or they invest in improving the infrastructure of child care in their communities; this study helps to expand the understanding of what is important to parents in a child care center.

Reports and Materials

The following reports and materials from the Family-Friendly Child Care Project are available on the American Business Collaborative (ABC) web site:

www.abcdpendentcare.com.

- ☑ What Is Family-Friendly-Child Care and Why Does it Matter? What Parents and Providers Say – and the Implications for Quality Care: Final Report. *(full report of the study's findings)*
- ☑ A Parent's Guide to Family-Friendly Child Care Centers. *(brochure for parents)*
- ☑ Implementing Family-Friendly Child Care: Benefits for Families and Centers. *(summary report for the child care provider audience)*
- ☑ Family-Friendly Child Care for Working Families: Implications for Employers. *(summary report for the business audience)*
- ☑ Family-Friendly Audit Tool for Child Care Centers. *(both English and Spanish versions of the audit tool)*
- ☑ Scoring Spreadsheet. *(an Excel spreadsheet for scoring results of the audit tool)*
- ☑ Scoring Instructions. *(instructions for using the scoring spreadsheet)*