

Policies and Practices to Improve Access to Early Care and Education (ECE) for Low-Income Hispanic Families

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Achievement gaps for low-income Hispanic^a children, particularly dual language learners, exist at kindergarten entry and widen over time.¹⁻³ Improving Hispanic families' use of high-quality ECE can facilitate parental employment and reduce gaps in school readiness between Latino and non-Latino children.⁴ Drawing from a recently published synthesis of the research on Hispanic ECE access, we highlight some key issues policymakers and providers should consider to expand the availability, affordability, and accessibility of early care and education (ECE) for young children from low-income Hispanic families.⁴



ECE must meet parent's needs.

- **Hispanic parents need ECE with expanded hours.** Many center-based ECE providers may not adequately meet the needs of families who work nonstandard hours^b—that is, roughly speaking, hours outside of the traditional 9:00 am to 5:00 pm, Monday to Friday work schedule.^{5,6} Most young Hispanic children with working parents have at least one parent who works nonstandard hours, especially on weekends.⁷
 - Policies that support ECE providers, including home-based and center-based care settings, to expand and prioritize care during nonstandard hours can further meet families' needs.
 - Policies that encourage flexibility in ECE timing and available hours may be particularly useful for Hispanic parents with irregular (variable) work schedules, or those enrolled in adult education programs, which often take place during evenings and weekends.^{6,8}
- **Hispanic parents need assistance in locating adequate and affordable ECE providers.** Research found that in a 24-month period, low-income Hispanic parents report conducting fewer searches for ECE than other low-income groups.⁹ The cost of child care is a top concern among this population.¹⁰ However, other barriers to ECE programs include the belief that other families may have a greater need than their own; a lack of awareness of programs; and mistrust, stigma and perceived immigration-related ineligibility.^{11,12}
 - Policies and practices that support ECE searches will increase awareness of ECE options and improve enrollment among Latino children. Strategies to support searches include making ECE information available in Spanish; increasing available funding for community-based organizations that engage Hispanic families; recruiting and employing bilingual ECE providers; and encouraging partnerships and coordination for ECE outreach through federal, state, and local health and education organizations.^{13,14}

^a We use "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably throughout the brief. Consistent with the U.S. Census definition, this includes individuals having origins in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, as well as other "Hispanic, Latino or Spanish" origins.

^b Although the specific work hours that are identified as nonstandard varies in the literature, the term generally refers to work schedules that include late evening, early morning, and weekend hours.

ECE and employment are intertwined.

- **Expansion of available and affordable high-quality ECE is an investment in the broader economic well-being of a community.**¹⁵ Funding for ECE is not consistent across communities, and a lack of child care options can limit parents' ability to work, particularly for low-income parents. Research on child care deserts (areas with limited child care options) reveals that communities lacking in viable child care options also tend to be economically disadvantaged.¹⁶ Additionally, low-income Hispanic parents need ECE not only for employment, but also to pursue educational opportunities to secure their families' economic well-being and mobility.¹⁷ Therefore, investments in ECE—at the federal, state, or local level—must co-occur with broader economic investments in communities.
 - State-level policymakers must use community-level data to inform the targeted expansion of ECE into child care deserts that constrain parents from entering the workforce.
 - Eligibility for child care subsidies often includes a minimum work requirement. More states should allow enrollment in job training or education programs to meet that requirement. This can help increase subsidy access for low-income Hispanic parents, who often have low levels of education and variable, unpredictable work hours.^{6,7}
- **Reducing workplace stress is critical for low-income Hispanic workers with families.** Estimates using national data show that many low-income working Hispanic parents, particularly immigrants, report receiving little advance notice of their work hours (1 week or less).⁷ This leads to increased stress among families who face constant pressures to schedule child care that accommodates their work schedules, while also providing care and stability for their family.
 - Family-friendly workplaces and policies—including family leave, sick and personal days to attend to unpredictable family situations, greater worker input in scheduling, and more flexible work schedules—can reduce family stress and, in turn, promote children's health and well-being.¹⁸

Access to ECE is increasing, yet disparities remain.

- **A continued focus on reducing disparities in access to ECE is essential.** Increased enrollment in ECE can help reduce achievement gaps between Latino and non-Latino children. While national estimates show that low-income Hispanic preschool-age children are about as likely as their white peers to participate in ECE, disparities in enrollment remain for infants and toddlers.^{4,19}
 - Policies are needed to ensure that ECE opportunities reach more young children. Investments in federal programs like the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start and Early Head Start, and state and local public preschool programs are expanding access for increasing numbers of children and could be expanded further for infants and toddlers.
 - The reauthorization of Child Care Development Block Grants (CCDBG) prioritizes subsidies for certain groups, including children who need care during nontraditional and variable hours, infants and toddlers, children in rural areas, and children with disabilities and special needs.²⁰ Data suggests the priority groups should remain a focus of the CCDBG legislation, scheduled for reauthorization in 2020.

Continual training of the ECE workforce and support of culturally diverse ECE providers increase ECE quality.

- **The ECE workforce must work effectively with diverse groups of families.** The quality of ECE is highly dependent on the resources and training given to ECE providers. Improving the quality of ECE for young children can occur, for example, through implementation of evidence-based parenting programs, home visitation, and the provision of access to specialists who assist families with children's health, educational, and developmental needs.²¹⁻²³ However, there are some clear needs for Hispanic families.

- Research shows that about 1 in 5 ECE centers serve a high proportion of Hispanic children (defined as centers where more than 25 percent of the children enrolled are Hispanic).²⁴ As ECE expansion occurs, programs that encourage training and certification of providers from culturally diverse and multi-lingual backgrounds will ensure that our future ECE workforce keeps pace with the current diversity of our immigrant and Hispanic child populations.
- Two areas of training should be prioritized for all ECE providers working with Hispanic populations: 1) training in approaches for teaching dual language learners and 2) training in trauma-informed approaches to care, including recognition of emotional and behavioral signs of distress among Hispanic children.^{25,26}



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The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Child Trends, in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is supported by grant #90PH0025 from the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The contents are solely the responsibility of the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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