

Missing Out on What Matters: Early Care and Education Quality and Stability Gaps for Children in Foster Care

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Stable relationships and consistent routines are foundational to healthy development in early childhood. For children in foster care (CiFC), who often face multiple disruptions in caregivers and living arrangements, this kind of stability is especially critical and often absent (McLeigh et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2019). Participation in high-quality early care and education (ECE) programs can help reduce the increased risk of poor developmental outcomes related to these circumstances. The demonstrated benefits of CiFC's participation in ECE include more stable foster care placements and more positive developmental and school readiness outcomes (Meloy & Phillips, 2012; Merritt & Klein, 2015).

These benefits are most likely when children experience both high-quality care and stability in ECE settings. ECE programs that lack quality features or specialized supports may offer limited benefits to CiFC, especially when children experience frequent changes in care (Kovan et al., 2014; Lipscomb et al., 2014). While research on what matters most in ECE for CiFC is limited, existing evidence and the lived experiences of families and providers point to a clear need to strengthen both quality and stability (Conners-Burrow et al., 2013).

This brief examines the quality of ECE programs that Arkansas CiFC enroll in and the stability of their participation in these programs. It presents results from a project that is part of a collaboration between the Arkansas Department of Education/Division of Elementary and Secondary Education/Office of Early Childhood (OEC), the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), SRI International, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The collaboration team is focused on learning about the supply, quality, and stability of ECE settings for CiFC, as well as factors that promote or reduce access to high-quality ECE.

Methods

This project used a mixed-methods approach to examine the quality and stability of ECE for CiFC in Arkansas. Data sources included administrative data, a foster parent survey, and focus groups with foster parents and ECE providers.

Administrative Data Analysis

The project team analyzed Arkansas state administrative data on 3,110 CiFC and 23,276 non-CiFC children (ages birth to 5) who accessed subsidized ECE through Child Care and Development Fund [CCDF] vouchers between August 1, 2021, and July 31, 2022. Additional data sources included the Head Start Program Information Report, OEC licensing data, the Arkansas Better Chance (ABC) program database, and the Arkansas Department of Human Services' Fiscal Year 2022 Annual Report Card. Analyses focused on ECE quality, stability, and access.

Foster Parent Survey

The project team, in collaboration with DCFS, invited all Arkansas resource parents ($N = 1,942$) to complete an online survey in May 2024.¹ Parents answered screening questions at the beginning of the survey to determine if they were eligible to complete the survey; respondents had to have accepted new CiFC and sought ECE within the past 12 months. The survey focused on foster parents' experiences searching for and using ECE programs for their most recent CiFC. A total of 105 foster parents completed the survey, including 66 traditional DCFS foster parents, 24 relative/fictive kin foster parents, and 15 Private Licensed Placement Agency foster parents.²

Focus Groups and Interviews

The project team conducted focus groups and interview sessions with 21 foster parents and 10 ECE providers (from center- and home-based settings) to better understand their experiences caring for CiFC. Pairs of researchers conducted each session using a semi-structured protocol. Protocols for foster parents explored topics such as finding and selecting child care, experiences with ECE providers, and suggestions for improving access to care. Protocols for ECE providers addressed program capacity to serve CiFC, experiences serving CiFC, and needed supports. Using a rapid coding approach (Hamilton, 2013), three trained researchers jointly coded 46% of transcripts to establish reliability and resolve discrepancies, before individual researchers coded the remaining transcripts. The team reviewed all coded summaries to identify themes and subthemes.

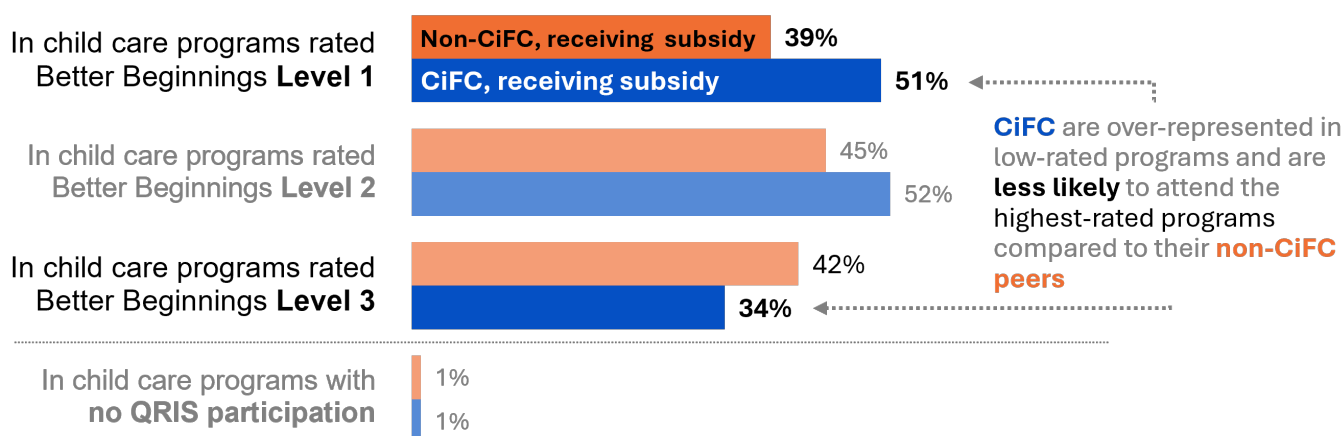
¹ [Arkansas Department of Human Services, DCFS \(2024\)](#) uses the term "resource parent" to refer to "an individual or family, respectively, in those homes that provide a family-like setting on a twenty-hour (24) hour basis for children in the custody of and placed there by the DHS. The term resource home is used because these homes are designed to serve as resources to children in the custody of DHS" (p. 3). In this brief, we use the term "foster parent" because it may be more familiar to a broader national audience. The 1,942 survey recipients included fictive kin, foster, provisional, and relative placements.

² Private Licensed Placement Agencies are private agencies that provide foster placement and foster family support services under contracts with DCFS.

Findings

CiFC Are Less Likely Than Their Peers to Participate in Higher Quality ECE

Nearly half (45%) of CiFC received a Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) voucher to attend an ECE program. Among children using CCDF vouchers, CiFC were less likely than their non-CiFC peers to attend the highest-rated programs. About a third of CiFC participated in ECE programs that achieved the highest level (Level 3)³ in Better Beginnings, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), compared with 42% of non-CiFC who were enrolled in the highest rated programs. About half of CiFC (51%) attended the lowest quality rated programs (Level 1), compared with 39% of non-CiFC who attended programs at this level.



Note: Both CiFC and non-CiFC are children ages birth to 5 years, and they all receive CCDF vouchers. N = 23,276 for non-CiFC; N = 1,384 for CiFC. Children may participate in more than one program.

During the focal period for these analyses, ECE programs could serve CiFC through subsidies at Better Beginnings Level 1. However, at the time of this publication, ECE programs are required to be at Better Beginnings Level 2 or higher to accept subsidy.

Only 7% of CiFC were enrolled in Arkansas state-funded ABC prekindergarten programs, while 6% of CiFC were enrolled in Early Head Start/Head Start (EHS/HS) programs, which CiFC are categorically eligible to attend. More than one in five CiFC (21%) attended an Early Intervention Day Treatment (EIDT) program, which offers on-site therapy services and transportation for children but often lacks inclusion of both typically developing children and children with disabilities.

Foster Parents Value ECE but Struggle to Find Programs That Meet Their Child's Needs

Foster parents generally expressed positive perceptions of the ECE programs their CiFC attended, although many raised concerns about program quality and alignment with their children's unique needs.

³ Level 3 on the QRIS was the highest rating during the focal period for these analyses; however, the highest rating at the time of this publication is Level 6.

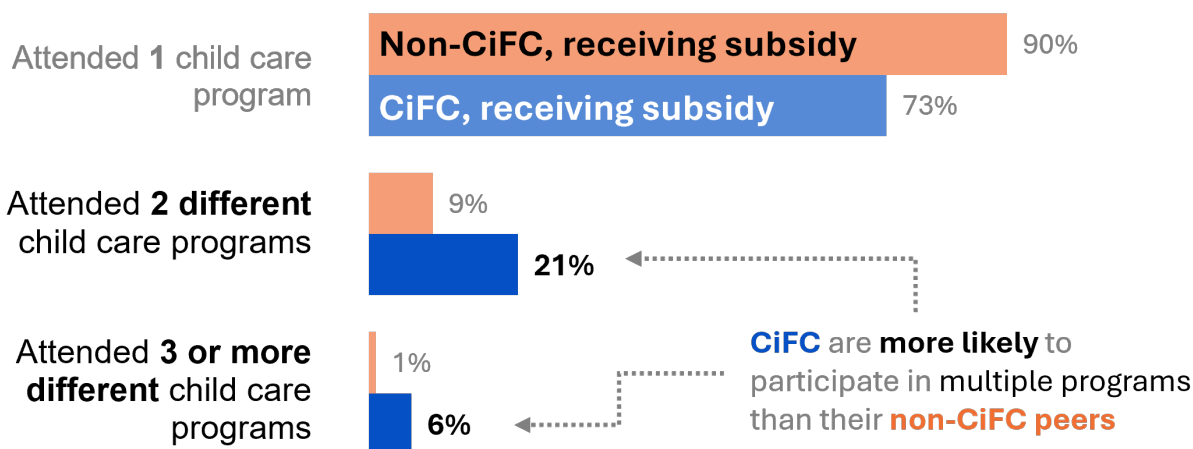
The large majority of foster parents (88%) rated “the way caregivers treat your child,” as *good* or *excellent*. Somewhat fewer parents rated other quality indicators, including “the way care is supporting your child’s development” (80%), “the ability of staff to manage behavior concerns” (70%), and “consistent, stable staff” (67%), as *good* or *excellent*.

Despite these favorable views, many foster parents identified challenges. A third of foster parents (33%) indicated that in the past 12 months, they had to use child care they thought was not of high enough quality to meet their child’s needs. Fewer than half of parents (43%) also reported that staff in their child’s program used trauma-informed practices, although 28% were not sure whether staff used these practices.

Focus group discussions reinforced these survey findings. Several foster parents expressed concerns about the availability of high-quality settings that meet their family’s needs. A barrier for foster parents, one parent explained, “was just finding people that we trusted, daycares that we trusted, to take care of them, when so few places take vouchers, and some of the places that take vouchers are not great ... and that’s just a shame. ... Just because they’re a foster child, do they deserve less?” Another parent said, “But it’s like we have biological children and then we’ve had foster children, and sometimes it’s like, oh my gosh, if that was the only spot that they have in a daycare setting that takes those vouchers, but would I send my own kids there? No ... sometimes you’re just kind of between a rock and a hard place.”

CiFC Experience Less Stable Child Care Than Children Not in Foster Care Do

CiFC are more likely to participate in multiple ECE programs over a 12-month period than non-CiFC. Among children who participated in ECE from 2022 to 2023, 6% of CiFC attended three or more programs, compared with 1% of non-CiFC. During this same period, the percentage of CiFC who attended two programs (21%) was more than twice that of non-CiFC (9%).



Note: Both CiFC and non-CiFC are children ages birth to 5 years, and they all receive CCDF vouchers. N = 23,276 for non-CiFC; N = 1,384 for CiFC.

Multiple factors contribute to this instability. Among parents who reported their CiFC left an ECE program in the previous 12 months, a third (33%) reported this was due to the child changing foster placements. Other reasons included switching to a program that offered full-day care (20%), higher quality care (14%), or on-site services and therapies (7%). Some transitions were linked to changes in family status, such as the child leaving their biological parent (19%) or returning to their biological parent (9%), or the child being adopted (7%).

Focus group participants described how systemic challenges limit continuity. Foster parents pointed to moves across county lines and limited communication with child welfare agencies about transition supports. One parent commented that they did not think the topic of keeping a child in the same program “really comes up because they’re so desperate to find homes for these kids ... and most of the time you’re not getting your own county kids anymore.” Another resource parent said that “all of our kids that have reunified, none of them have been local. And so their school changes, their daycare changes, their entire routine changes when they go into care and also when they’re reunified.”

Some foster parents and ECE providers reported that transitions often occur with little notice and that transition planning is rare, especially when CiFC return to their biological families. One director remarked, “The foster parent gets notified the night before or sometimes the day of.” Another said, “We’ve had foster parents drop a child off in the morning and DHS [Department of Human Services] pick them up for a visit and they never come back ... it usually happens very, very quickly.”

One foster parent and an ECE program director mentioned a few exceptional cases when children continued to attend the same ECE programs after being reunified with their biological families, suggesting that ECE continuity is sometimes possible when special efforts are made.

Recommendations

The Arkansas project team is testing a range of solutions to the challenges described in this brief. We share the recommendations below, in hopes they may be beneficial to leaders in other states.

Provide Foster Parents With Practical Guidance to Access High-Quality ECE

Foster parents may benefit from both information and hands-on support to access high-quality ECE options for CiFC. State agency leaders might consider including this guidance in regular training sessions for foster parents, including opportunities that help them meet their training requirements. The guidance could identify the features of high-quality, inclusive, trauma-informed care that benefit CiFC. The training could also provide information about how to use available support, such as Child Care Aware resource specialists who can connect foster parents to high-quality ECE programs in their community. Case workers should receive similar training so they can provide this information at key decision points, including when asking a foster

parent to accept a new placement. Evidence presented in an earlier brief shows that many foster parents turn down placement requests if they have concerns about finding child care (Grindal et al., 2025).

Expand the Supply of High-Quality Extended-Day ECE Options, Including Early Head Start/Head Start and ABC State Prekindergarten Programs

EHS/HS and ABC programs typically receive the highest quality ratings and, in the case of EHS/HS, offer comprehensive services and inclusive settings for children with disabilities. However, many of these programs operate on part-day schedules that may not align with foster parents' work hours, although some offer extended care or transportation. State leaders might consider funding incentives to expand extended-day options in these settings. Funding could be used to provide additional hours of care on-site at EHS/HS and ABC programs or transportation to partner programs that could provide extended-day care. Further, inclusive settings are known to benefit children with disabilities by providing experience interacting with peers who model more advanced language and social skills (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education, 2023). More foster parents might select these high-quality options if they provided full-day care, as most foster parents report needing this coverage due to their work schedules (Perez et al., 2025).

Promote ECE Programs' Use of Supports for High Quality and Specialized Practices That Benefit CiFC

ECE providers need support in implementing trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate practices that respond to the unique needs of CiFC. State leaders and professionals who provide quality supports to ECE programs can best meet the developmental and early learning needs of infants and young CiFC by providing resources that help ECE providers use practices that promote CiFC's early learning, growth, and well-being. Resources such as a [brief guide to support ECE providers meet the special needs of CiFC](#) and [Arkansas's Child Care & Child Welfare Partnership Toolkit](#), combined with professional development, coaching, and infant and early childhood mental health consultation, can help ECE providers address the needs of infants and young children who have been exposed to trauma (Connors-Burrow et al., 2013). State agencies should encourage multiple professionals who come into contact with ECE programs and providers that serve CiFC (e.g., licensing staff, professional development specialists) to proactively connect ECE providers to these resources and supports.

Review ECE Quality and Continuity at Each Placement or Reunification Transition

Transitions in foster care often disrupt CiFC's participation in familiar ECE settings. To encourage continuity when appropriate, state agencies could promote practices that increase CiFC's stability of care in a familiar, high-quality setting, when this is possible. Through guidance and training, state agencies could require that case managers routinely discuss the possibility of keeping the child in a high-quality, familiar ECE program during transition planning. These discussions could involve the biological parent, in cases of reunification, and foster parents, if the child is moving to foster care or to a new foster care home, as well as staff at the child's ECE program. Case managers could encourage consideration of the child's needs as well as the preferences of parents. While continued enrollment may not always be feasible, building this review into routine practice can increase the number of children who benefit from consistent relationships and environments during periods of change.

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