

Research Notes

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Making the Most of Connections to Support License-Exempt Child Care Providers

In 2004, federal and state monies underwrote a large proportion of the cost of child care services for over 1.7 million children from income-eligible families. Nationally, 26% of these children were cared for in settings in which a government-issued license to operate is not required, those the U.S. Child Care Bureau defines as “legally operating without regulation.”¹ While this figure accurately suggests that about one in four American children served by publicly-funded subsidies is cared for in license-exempt settings, in many geographic areas the percentages are quite higher. In Illinois for instance, the use of license-exempt child care accounts for nearly half (48%) of all children receiving services via the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP), a level that directly impacts more than 150,000 children.

In Illinois, license-exempt child care encompasses four specific arrangements: 1) family child care providers who care for no more than three children including their own (unless all of the children are from the same household); 2) non-relatives providing care in the child’s home; 3) relative providers caring for children in the relative’s home; and 4) relatives providing care in the child’s home. Among the key findings from their examination of the Illinois early childhood workforce, Krajec, Bloom, Talan, and Clark reported that “many caregivers operate outside the established early childhood regulatory system and thus do not have access to technical assistance or professional training.”² Research has also shown that while license-exempt providers possess little formal child care training, they do have interest in having training and other supports available to them.³

The Connections Survey

In September 2005, the Connections Survey was conducted with Illinois license-exempt child care providers who had received payments for their services through CCAP.⁴ The random sample of 102 providers was stratified to ensure that outcomes were representative of the distribution of license-exempt providers among each of the 17 CCAP service delivery areas throughout the state.

Administered by telephone, the Connections Survey was used to solicit license-exempt providers’ responses to questions about the human and institutional sources they believed could provide them with reliable information about early childhood education and care. The instrument was also used to probe the extent to which license-exempt providers are connected to the Internet and use it to carry out a range of online pursuits.

Findings

Family members are by far the most common type of license-exempt caregivers (80%); among relative providers, a strong majority is comprised of grandmothers of the children in care. Nearly one-half (49%) of license-exempt providers in Illinois have been caring for children for at least five years. Typically, each license-exempt caregiver is providing care for two or three children.

Two-thirds of Illinois license-exempt child care providers have participated in child care classes or workshops, most commonly related to CPR or first aid training, but only one-third have attended a training event related to parenting education or child development. Seven out of ten license-exempt providers have finished high school or obtained a GED, but only 10% have earned any kind of college degree. Fifteen percent report that they have taken at least one college course in child development or early childhood education.

License-exempt child care providers in Illinois are very interested in training on specific topics related to school readiness:

- 74% are very interested in training on helping children learn how to read
- 70% are very interested in training on helping children be ready for kindergarten
- 67% are very interested in training on helping children with early math skills

Respondents to the Connections Survey view educators and educational institutions as the sources they would trust most for information about early childhood education and care, particularly when they are seeking information related to their roles in helping the children in their care to enter kindergarten prepared for school success.

Family members are by far the most common type of license-exempt caregivers

One-half of Illinois license-exempt child care providers access the Internet regularly. Furthermore, they perceive online information sources as more convenient than traditional face-to-face options, an outcome that contraindicates the method most commonly utilized by local and regional agencies to deliver provider training. This finding supports the use of the Internet as a potential tool for connecting child care providers to helpful information about early childhood education and care.

Implications for Policy and Practice

More young children in Illinois receiving care via state subsidy payments are cared for in license-exempt homes than in any other recognized setting, yet efforts to sustain license-exempt child care providers' involvement in the formal early childhood professional development system have been marginally effective. This study confirmed previous research showing low participation rates by providers in formal training events on topics related to child development, an outcome that is likely the by-product of constraints on the provider rather than the result of insufficient efforts by state agencies or the agencies' lack of zeal in reaching out to them.

Nonetheless, the high stakes associated with the large number of children in license-exempt child care, and the urgent matter of ensuring that they begin kindergarten prepared to succeed in school, warrants a re-doubled effort to connect license-exempt providers more closely to the resources that can make a difference on their practice and in the lives of the children in their care.

Most promising, a high proportion of license-exempt child care providers in Illinois are very interested in learning about helping children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed in school. Findings about providers' interest in issues related to early literacy development, early math skills development, and overall readiness for kindergarten are a source of optimism for state early childhood administrators who have been charged with ensuring that Illinois children transitioning from all types of child care settings are entering school prepared to succeed.

Findings from the Connections Study demonstrate the Internet's prospects for reaching a substantial number of license-exempt child care providers online. In light of ongoing constraints on federal and state budgets to support high quality across all child care settings, a carefully constructed model to connect license-exempt child care providers via the Internet has potential as an innovative, efficient means of serving them with helpful information about meeting the school readiness needs of the children in their care.

Those interviewed for the Connections study indicated their respect for local teachers and school personnel as sources they would consult for information related to early childhood education and care. They also indicated high levels of interest in learning more about how they can help the children in their care attain state school readiness goals. Based on these findings, local stakeholders might consider supporting school sites as the logistical gateways for connecting license-exempt child care providers with online resources to inform their caregiving practices. A community schools model would provide a local context for coordination of resources and collaboration by key stakeholders to ensure that all children enter kindergarten prepared to succeed.

Despite their existence outside of the state's formal professional development system, license-exempt child care providers demonstrate a degree of commitment and concern that warrants further investment to connect them with people and resources to inform their caregiving practices. Policymakers should act on the potential for making use of the Internet and online technology as a vehicle for enhancing the professional development of this important segment of the child care workforce.

Policymakers should act on the potential for making use of the Internet and online technology to inform the practice of license-exempt child care providers.

1. Child Care Bureau. (2006). *FFY 2004 CCDF data tables*. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ccb/research/04acf800/table1.htm>
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3. Anderson, S., Ramsburg, D., & Scott, J. (2005). *Illinois study of license-exempt child care: Final report*. Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois.
4. Clark, D. (2006). *Making the most of connections: Illinois license-exempt child care providers' use of information about early childhood education and care*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA. Retrieved from <http://www.childcareresearch.org/location/ccra10614>

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