

*Listening as parents talk about the quality of child care.*

# Taking care!

*A report based on information  
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**SOUTH DAKOTA  
COALITION  
FOR CHILDREN**

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## Who is caring for our youngest children?

In South Dakota, there's a two-part answer to that question: Parents (or other relatives) — and paid child-care providers. Fully 73 percent of families with children age 6 and younger have both parents in the labor force, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. South Dakota leads the nation with 47 percent of children under age 6 in paid child care, as compared to a national average of 24 percent.<sup>1</sup>

Though they may not realize it, every resident of this state has a stake in the quality of care its children receive.

## Learning begins early

*“Somehow we have to get that message out — how important it is to have quality child care starting from (birth). Children learn more from (ages) 0 to 3 than at any other time of their lives.” — Belle Fourche parent*

Scientific evidence suggests the brain undergoes its most significant development before age 5. We're born with virtually all the brain cells we'll ever have, says Florida physician Wil Blechman, whose research focuses on preschool-aged children. “But those brain cells are for the largest part, not really connected.”

The “connections” — synapses — come as children experience different sounds, voices, music,

colors. “All of this is imprinting on the brain as synapses develop,” according to Blechman. “If we wait until after age 5 (to provide a learning environment), these kids are going to have problems.”

To illustrate the potential scope, Blechman quotes a senior juvenile court official in Miami who responded to the doctor's suggestion that working with middle-school age children would help curb delinquency. “Go right ahead,” the judge told Blechman, “and you'll have no impact whatsoever on what comes through this juvenile court, because you're too late.” As one Aberdeen parent concluded, “Fight crime, invest in kids.”

## Listening to parents

*“For parents who can't stay home with their kids ... it weighs heavily on moms...” — Aberdeen parent*

Who is teaching and caring for South Dakota's children, while their parents work?

The Office of Childcare reports that statewide, there are 133 child care centers (13 children or more), 92 group family day cares (serving 13-20 children) and 925 registered family day care homes (12 children or fewer)<sup>2</sup>. The state doesn't track unregistered day-care providers. In addition, many South Dakota children are cared for by relatives while mom and dad are on the job. Some are paid, some are not.

<sup>1</sup>2003 Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being.

<sup>2</sup>Data for Community Planning Executive Summary, South Dakota Department of Social Services Office of Child Care Services, April 2003.

In either situation, what is quality care—and how difficult is it to find in this state? The voices most often missing from that discussion are those of parents. Seeking answers to a variety of questions about child care, the South Dakota Coalition for Children conducted a series of listening sessions in six representative South Dakota communities — urban, mid-sized, rural and reservation. They included Sioux Falls, Rapid City, Aberdeen, Belle Fourche, Miller and Mission. Participants were for the most part self-selected as they responded to announcements issued through newspapers, radio and flyers.

Ninety individuals took part in seven sessions<sup>3</sup> at which — for the first time in South Dakota — parents were invited to discuss child care. Their voices form the basis for this report. While they represent but a fraction of the state’s families with young children, most indicated their views were representative of a wider circle of relatives, friends and acquaintances.

### *The ideal caregiver*

*“You want (a caregiver) who is ‘you’ — who, when your child falls down, will pick them up and kiss their boo-boo.” — Sioux Falls parent*

“Think about your child,” parents at each of the statewide sessions were instructed. “Or if you have more than one, think of your youngest — then describe the ideal

caregiver for your child.” Four common themes emerged from each of the six regions. Parents wanted to leave their children in the care of someone who ...

- Sincerely cares for him or her,
- Is patient and understanding,
- Is knowledgeable about child development,
- Maintains a low child-to-adult ratio.

“Some (child care) providers have too many children and just can’t take care of them,” said a Rapid City parent. And from Aberdeen, “You have a higher level of quality with a lower level of children.”

Quality also gets a big boost, parents said, from providers who have taken classes in early childhood development. “For good quality child care to exist, providers have to understand what that is,” emphasized a participant at the Belle Fourche session. “They have to get prepared to do it — education.”

Parents seek caregivers who are responsive to their youngsters’ needs. And, they say, even very young children can make it clear when that isn’t the case. “He would scream in the car going to her house,” a Miller mother described the drive to day care with her son.

“He didn’t like her. She yelled a lot and was not very loving. He didn’t say a lot, but I could tell.”

Trust is essential, parents said. A participant at Mission was even more specific. “We are leaving the

<sup>3</sup> One in each of the six communities listed and two in Sioux Falls — one convened for public input and the second with Head Start parents.

most precious things we have in someone else's hands," she said. "A background check (for child care providers) should be mandatory."

Dependability — being able to count on a provider — matters as well. And as much as in any profession, a sense of humor is a plus.

### *Keeping kids safe and happy*

*"(The best child-care environment is) clean, but not over-sterile. ... There should be all kinds of things that appeal to (kids') senses. It should be child-safe." — Rapid City parent*

Whether their youngsters are cared for in a private home or large facility, "clean" and "safe" were mandatory requirements listed by every listening group.

More than one parent observed that while the odor of bleach may signal that cleaning has occurred, it's unpleasant and antiseptic. "(A place for kids) should smell and feel like a place for a kid," said a Belle Fourche participant.

"I would hate to see an atmosphere of don't-touch-this, don't-touch-that," said another woman at the same listening session. "My child is in your environment, so make it accessible for the child — and safe."

Create space for activities and space for quiet time. Books, games and toys provide opportunities for growth. And, parents emphasized, meals should be appealing, appropriate and nutritious.

## about the *participants*

*Parents at the listening sessions were ...*

- 19 to 59 years of age (average age of 32)
- 86 percent female; 14 percent male
- 33 percent single parents

*They reported ...*

- Total number of children at home under age 19: 94 total
- Average age of children at home: 5
- Number of children in paid child care: 42 (45 percent)
- Average education: Associate degree



Participants were also specific about safety measures. They expect:

- Multiple exits for emergencies,
- Smoke detectors and fire extinguishers,
- Child-care providers who are first aid- and CPR-trained,
- Fenced yard,
- Sinks for hand-washing,
- Proper food handling,
- Safe cribs,
- Toys with secure parts that won't come off,
- No smoking by caregivers,
- Covered electrical outlets, electrical cords out of the way,
- Cleaners and chemicals stored in a locked cabinet.

What's the best way to assure that safety is a priority all day, every day? "Go and see what's going on," a Rapid City parent advises.

"Providers know what to say (to adults) when they (expect a visit). It is imperative that parents go there when they don't know you are coming. Do it lots of times."

Other parents, though, said they'd be uncomfortable pressing a child-care provider for more than verbal assurance about safety measures.

That's a role for the state, said a Head Start parent from Sioux Falls. "All in-home day care should be licensed. It makes (parents) feel better that the state has checked this out."

Indeed it does, agreed another parent, who explained that her licensed daycare provider's 13-year-old son sexually abused a child. As a result, the provider lost her license — though that didn't

put her out of business since family day cares may operate unregulated in South Dakota.

Mandatory licensing and stricter enforcement are needed safeguards, parents said. "All should be licensed so if (abuse occurs) and a license is pulled, those people can't be around children," that parent emphasized.

*What do children do all day?*

*"Play is really, really important. They learn so much from play. Play is really their work." — Rapid City parent*

Play is good, parents across the state agreed. Play within a structure is excellent. A variety of activities — finger-painting and other arts and crafts, sand and water play, dress-up, talking, singing, reading — help to develop fine and large motor skills and teach youngsters social skills.



A Miller mom testifies to the power of her child-care provider's ability to work with youngsters. "She can get the kids to do things I can't. The kids need the routine and they know the routine. Not that she's not flexible, but she follows a routine."

A routine for young children should include variety, as described by one Belle Fourche parent. "I would hope (a typical day) would be active, quiet, active, quiet, back and forth."

Achieving that balance requires a low child-to-caregiver ratio. "One to five is too much," said another woman from Belle Fourche. "The little ones get lost. It takes me a half-hour to get my daughter calmed down after day care because there are too many periods in the day when there are too many kids." That can also create other negative effects, she observes. "We're creating children with problems."

A Sioux Falls mother said daily activities can encourage positive behavior. "Kids learn how to play together and (they) learn to pick up ... and clean up their cubbies." They learn to wash their hands and other good personal hygiene habits.

And from Rapid City, "They need to socialize with other children. People don't fail as adults because they didn't get through school. They fail because they didn't learn to socialize as children." And because they failed to learn to respect others.

## *What is good quality child care?*

*"You can tell (about quality) by your kids — you know their moods when you pick them up." — Miller parent*

A loving, generous, patient caregiver creates a safe, nurturing environment — which is the essence of good quality child care, participants at every location agreed.

"A caregiver who gives them activities that promote imaginative play skills" is a find, said a Sioux Falls mother. More passive activities, like watching videos, get lower marks.

The current preoccupation with early academics prompted this comment from a parent at the Belle Fourche listening session: "We've failed — we want to teach reading, writing, math — but I'll see one child say something terrible to another child, and the teacher does nothing."

Instead, she urges caregivers, "Help (children) communicate. Let them know when it's not appropriate, help them to understand what hard words do to another child."

Too many youngsters cared for by too few adults cannot overcome the best intentions. "One of my child-care providers is good at heart, but she has too many kids to watch. They usually



# *types of child care*

in South Dakota

## ***Family Child Care Home (registration voluntary)\****

*May care for up to 12 children under age 6*

*Registration requires:*

- *Six hours of training annually for the provider and any registered helpers,*
- *CPR certification,*
- *Must adhere to limitation on number of infants/toddlers under age 2,*
- *Cleared background check of provider and other adults present with children,*
- *Basic health and safety standards.*

## ***Group Family Child Care Home (license mandatory)***

*Caring for 13 to 20 children under age 6*

*Licensing requires:*

- *Ten hours of training each year for provider and staff,*
- *CPR certification,*
- *Must adhere to staff-child ratios,*
- *Cleared background check of all staff,*
- *Facility standards for health and safety,*
- *Policies and practices for health and safety.*

## ***Child Care Center (license mandatory)***

*Caring for 21 or more children*

*Licensing requires:*

- *Twenty hours of training each year for provider and staff,*
- *CPR certification,*
- *Must adhere to staff-child ratios,*
- *Cleared background check of all staff,*
- *Facility standards for health and safety,*
- *Policies and practices for health and safety.*

*\*Required only if public funding is received, otherwise voluntary.*

sit in front of the TV,” said a parent at the Mission session.

Excellent child care means “laughing, singing, touching, hugs and kisses so (kids) know they are really loved,” says one Rapid City mom. “They need to be praised a lot.” Parents also appreciate information about their child. “I like to know what happened with my child that day,” one said, “illness, emotions, conflicts with other children ...”

And from Miller: “My son had reflux. (The woman who took care of him) made a note of when he ate and how much he ate without me asking for it. I didn’t think of it, but she did.”

### *What encourages quality?*

*“If people who actually like kids were the ones taking care of them, it would be great.” — Mission parent*

Although the U.S. Department of Labor describes pay for child care workers as “generally very low,” some parents at the listening sessions lamented that the money seems to drive some providers. “We need staff who are qualified and are there for the children,” said a woman at Mission, “not just for the money.”

That viewpoint was echoed by a Sioux Falls parent, “When interviewing (potential child care providers), I can tell if they’re in it for the money or they really like kids.

“Licensing (or registration) encourages quality,” she adds. “It makes me feel safer knowing the state has done a background check.”<sup>4</sup>

Licensing also assures a specific level of training in health, safety and child development. “People need to ask if their provider has a certificate of fingerprints on file and if they’ve had a criminal background check,” cautioned a Rapid City child care provider.

“I feel safer knowing the state has licensed (my provider) and has done a background check,” agreed a Sioux Falls parent.

Go see for yourself, urged another woman in Sioux Falls. “It’s important that the provider is the right fit for your child. Sometimes parents don’t investigate — or they wait until the last minute (then have few options).”

<sup>4</sup>Registration of family child care homes in South Dakota is strictly voluntary unless the provider receives public funds or cares for more than 12 youngsters.

From Aberdeen: “It takes parents to drive good quality child care. If parents understand what it is and fight for it,” they won’t settle for less than the best.

There’s a role for the community as well. Pushing for better child care — appropriate child-to-staff ratios, staff training, child safety and emotional and social growth — “has to be a combination of parents, families and business.”

Business? “To have high quality workers who won’t miss work,” said another woman at the Aberdeen listening session, “you have to have good quality child care.”

### *Barriers to quality*

*“I’ve been surrounded by professionals who are complaining about the price of child care. They don’t see the correlation between paying good money and quality.”*  
— Aberdeen parent

What is the greatest obstacle to quality child care in South Dakota? As Walt Kelly’s cartoon character Pogo ruefully observed, “We have met the enemy and it is us.”



Personal relationships with providers can affect parents’ perception of quality, according to participants at more than one location. “The first four-and-a-half years I thought they were wonderful people,” a Rapid City mother reported about her daughter’s caregivers. “I did not find out until she was about 5 that she had been a scapegoat.

“Friends told me they knew (about it), but because I liked the provider they didn’t tell me.”

And even when they are aware of problems, social constraints can make it difficult for parents to act. “I considered removing my child earlier,” a Miller woman said, “but (my child-care provider and I) were friends.”

Other parents feel they have no choice but to accept whoever is available.

Said a Belle Fourche woman, “What I find shocking is that we don’t demand better child care.”

Or, in some cases, even understand what comprises quality. “Parents don’t know to ask what education I’ve had,” said a Rapid City child-care provider. “People are (taking care of youngsters) without any training. Because I’m registered, the state can come and check me.”

But, “There are five unregistered providers to every one who is — and they charge the same amount as I do.”

Parents, too, feel the financial pinch. “I only have one child and I have a decent job,” said a Rapid City mom, “but full-time care in the summer is \$400 a month.

“It’s an enormous amount of money when you are paying it out,” she said, adding, “but when you are spending your day working for it, it’s hardly anything.”

“I don’t know what parents do who don’t have a decent job.”

They compromise, observed a woman from Belle Fourche, “There’s a woman ... who charges 50 cents an hour. (The care is so bad that) some parents have children going home dehydrated because they’re not receiving liquids — yet parents are still taking their children there because they can’t afford to do anything else.

“There are (individuals caring for kids) who are charging 25 cents an hour and taking 25 to 30 children.”

Clearly, that’s not in the best interest of any child — and by extension, the community. “Ratio matters. Environment matters,” said another Belle Fourche participant.

But low-wage jobs rob some South Dakota families of those choices. In 1999, some 19 percent of South Dakota families with children under age 5 earned less than the federal poverty threshold.<sup>3</sup> The threshold that year for a family of four was \$16,700 annually or about \$8 an hour.<sup>4</sup> In 2003, that threshold for the same size family is \$18,400 annually.<sup>5</sup>

Child-care assistance can, however, help such families pay for care while parents work. The program is available the South Dakota Office of Child Care.

## what is *quality* child care

*Asked to define quality, parents at every listening session — urban, rural and reservation — listed the following:*

- *Providers who like children,*
- *Providers who are understanding/patient,*
- *Providers with training in principles of child development,*
- *Staff-to-child ratio should be low,*
- *Licensing\* or registration\* of child-care facilities to assure basic standards of safety and cleanliness.*

*\*See “Types of child care in South Dakota,” page 6.*

<sup>3</sup> 2002 South Dakota Kids Count Factbook

<sup>4</sup> 2000 U.S. Census

<sup>5</sup> 2003 U.S. Health & Human Services guidelines

## Seeking child care — and finding it

*(Through word-of-mouth), you know where the bad experiences are and where the good experiences are. — Miller parent*

How do South Dakotans go about finding someone to care for their children? “In small communities like this,” said a Belle Fourche mother, “it’s word of mouth.”

Small-town parents aren’t alone in relying on the grapevine. It’s in operation throughout the state. Parents turn to best friends, acquaintances and coworkers for recommendations. “You can’t do any better as a reference than your best friend,” a Sioux Falls parent said.

That’s not necessarily an option, though, for people new to a town, as some pointed out. They turned variously to listings compiled by the state Department of Social Services, churches, posted on the Internet or advertisements — newspapers, telephone book, flyers. After settling on a day-care provider near her new home, one parent then conducted a quality-assurance test: “I let our kids go part-time for a week, while we watched to make sure it was a good fit.”

Parents in communities of every size report difficulty in finding providers willing to care for:

- Youngsters whose parents work at night or on weekends,
- Children who are ill,
- Infants,

- School-age kids,
- Special-needs children,
- Drop-ins (when a parent needs occasional care for a child).

The latter is a double-dip dilemma for families who are struggling financially. “There’s no approval for child care assistance while they are looking for jobs,” observes a Rapid City preschool worker, “and if they don’t have an income, they can’t pay for it.”

The same is true even for parents of less modest means, “We can’t pay (child-care providers) more than we make or we couldn’t afford them,” a Sioux Falls parent observes. “Because of that we can’t attract the most qualified people.”

## Assuring the future

*“The focus needs to turn back to early childhood. These kids are going to dictate what discipline will be in elementary school; what learning will be like in high school; what wage-earners will be like in the workforce.” — Belle Fourche parent*

The first-ever data book to focus on babies and toddlers in the United States documents the scope of the challenge. “America’s Babies,” released in November 2003 by Zero to Three: National Center for Infants and Toddlers, points out that in 1940, 67 percent of all married-couple families in this country had a wage-earning dad and a stay-at-home mom. In 1950, that was true of 53 percent of families. By 2000, that number was just 16 percent.

Other dramatic differences in the social and economic circumstances of young children and their families:

- Increases in the nature, schedule and amount of work outside the home by parents of young children.
- Economic hardship families face despite overall increases in maternal education and increased rates of parent employment.
- Growing numbers of babies and young children in child care settings of highly variable quality.

The quality of child care should be a national concern, according to the parents across the state. In the words of one, “Caregivers and teachers are performing the most important job in the country — they are carrying out the most critical role on a daily basis.”

The writer Suzanne LaFollette agrees, “What its children become that will the community become.”

We all have a stake in that future.



## Useful Web sites:

South Dakota Association for the Education of Young Children (AEYC):

<http://www.usd.edu/sdaeyc/sites.html>

South Dakota Child Care Services: [www.state.sd.us/social/ccs/ccshome.htm](http://www.state.sd.us/social/ccs/ccshome.htm)

Zero to Three: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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