

INTRODUCTION

The demand for early care and education services experienced in the last decade has been unprecedented in the history of our Nation. The demand has been driven by increased numbers of women entering the workforce, welfare reform, a desire for young children to experience the social and academic benefits of group programs, and the need for available and flexible care to meet the nonstandard work schedules of the Nation's many service industry workers. As demand has increased for early care and education programming, so has the field's interest in the impact this programming has on young children's well-being.

It takes a variety of early care and education programs to meet the diverse needs of America's families. Some needs are met by center-based programs: large and small, profit and nonprofit, independent and corporate-sponsored, faith-based and school-based, and privately and publicly funded. Other families' needs are met by large or small family child care homes. These may be operated by a single caregiver, a couple, several family members, or may include paid employees. Still other families' needs are met by family members, friends, or neighbors. These providers may not think of child care as a profession, but typically provide services because they want to support the family or have close bonds with the children.

Quality and the Workforce

A number of major studies have demonstrated that high-quality early care and education programs can have a profound and lasting impact on young children. The impacts include both academic gains and increased self-regulation and social skills that make learning possible. Children who are nurtured and taught by sensitive, well-trained, and well-compensated teachers and caregivers have enhanced language and reading scores and are more ready to enter kindergarten. Long-term benefits for children from low-income families include higher graduation rates, more stable employment, and higher incomes. Because of the known benefits of high-quality programs, it is important that they are available in all the many early care and education settings that serve children and their families.

A range of quality can be found among every type and auspice of early care and education program. Although they may look different and be delivered in different ways based on program type and philosophy, there are specific elements that contribute to quality. Among those elements are adult-child ratios; group sizes; caregiver/teacher qualifications; planned, interdisciplinary curricula; and warm, supportive environments. However, central to the quality of any program, regardless of setting, size, philosophy, or funding, are providers who care for children.

The knowledge, skills, and dispositions of the teachers and caregivers, their interactions with the children, and their ability to plan age-appropriate activities all contribute to quality programming for children. Research is just beginning to uncover some of the complex interplay of factors that change providers' practices and how that in turn impacts the quality of care children receive. The following provides a big picture overview of what we know and don't know about professional development.

What We Know and Don't Know About Professional Development

- ★ The quality of a child's early learning experiences provides the foundation for future success in school and life.
 - *We know:* Quality learning experiences are the result of purposeful planning on the part of parents, caregivers, teachers, and policy-makers.
 - *We don't know:* How much, to what extent, and under what conditions professional preparation, training, and supports for practitioners translate into quality learning experiences for young children.

- ★ Quality of care is associated with caregiver continuity, staff wages, and quality of work environments.
 - *We know:* Rates of practitioner retention are related to positive work environments that offer appropriate support, salaries, and benefits.
 - *We don't know:* The combinations of support and conditions (e.g., job satisfaction) that matter most to practitioners and reduce turnover.

- ★ Providing positive models for all children from their own culture, as well as from others, is essential to quality.
 - *We know:* Cultural factors, including support of home languages, have an impact on English language development and educational success of children from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds.
 - *We don't know:* The most effective methods and policies to build authentic representation and diversify the early childhood workforce and its leadership.

- ★ Education, preparation, and training that include specific early childhood development content are associated with better quality care.
 - *We know:* Professional preparation and training must focus on content, delivery, and competency demonstration to be effective.
 - *We don't know:* The training and education thresholds that result in improved quality.
 - *We know:* Inconsistencies in definitions and measurement of professional development hinder the determination of consistent findings across research studies.
 - The term "some college" differs greatly across studies, from one-credit courses to an accumulation of credits that would meet requirements for an associate's, bachelor's, or advanced degree.
 - Training and certifications have been combined in many studies.
 - *We don't know:* The implications of findings for multiple populations and settings.
 - Most studies focusing on training have been conducted with family child care providers.
 - Studies that include higher education coursework have been done primarily with center-based practitioners and do not clarify the specifics of early childhood content.

Though many questions remain unanswered by research to date, policy-makers must move ahead now with decisions about programs and policies to support the workforce. Lessons can and have been learned about system and activity development and the effectiveness of implementation. A simplified framework for professional development described in the next section and State examples and resources in each subsequent section of this toolkit capture some of these lessons learned and examples that, combined with research, can help States/Territories make informed decisions about professional development for their early care and education workforce.

