

Early Childhood Education

Access to early childhood education and childcare are crucial issues for working parents and caregivers. Early childhood education in particular has positive impacts on healthy child development, family stability, and community wellbeing. Among other benefits, early childhood education:

- Improves children's school readiness and improves school performance outcomes.¹
- Has long-term benefits including reduced crime rates and reduced need for state cash assistance.¹
- Reduces risk of child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement by ensuring caregivers are more supported and less isolated.²

By investing in high quality and affordable early education for all children, we can help ensure that parents, caregivers, and children have the best opportunity for strong relationships and long-term success.

WHY IT MATTERS

Seventy-four percent of Wisconsin children under six years old have all parents in the workforce.³ Working parents and other primary caregivers need a safe, reliable, affordable place to send their kids while they are at work. Parents who are completing high school or pursuing higher education to get better-paying jobs also need safe, reliable care.

For families involved with the child welfare system, caregivers typically need a job or other steady income source as a condition for case closure or family reunification, and for long-term out-of-home kinship placements. Childcare is especially important in these situations.

Parents and caregivers across sectors have minimal to no parental leave to care for their children themselves even right after birth, and low wage jobs (which do not pay enough to cover childcare) are more likely to lack parental leave entirely.⁵

Early childhood education is a key solution: it not only provides parents and other caregivers with childcare, but also prepares children for school and provides important early cognitive and socioemotional development opportunities.²

Benefits of early education start showing up almost immediately, and continue to grow as the child ages:

- Infant-5 years old: Reduced child abuse & neglect, higher maternal earnings and tax revenue.¹
- 5-17: Improved school readiness and high school graduation rates, reduced need for special education and juvenile crime.¹
- 18+: Higher educational attainment, higher earnings and homeownership rates, lower need for cash assistance.¹
- The long-term return on investment for every dollar spent on early childhood programs for children from low-income families is between \$4 and \$16.³

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

The cost and availability of high-quality facilities are significant barriers to access for many families. Across Wisconsin, the average yearly cost of childcare for one infant is \$12,567, more than what the average Wisconsin family pays for rent in a year, and more than a year of in-state tuition at a 4-year college.³ Wisconsin Shares, the state program for childcare subsidies, significantly lowers the cost of care for many families. However, it doesn't currently serve everyone who needs it.

- Only 45% of income-eligible families in Milwaukee receive subsidies through Wisconsin Shares, in part due to difficulty navigating the application process.⁵
- Wisconsin Shares does not fully cover costs. In 2017, families had to pay more than their program copay in 85% of available slots.⁶

High-quality early childhood education is limited and inequitably distributed. YoungStar, the program responsible for evaluating childcare and early childhood education facility quality in Wisconsin, provides insight into where high-quality facilities are located.

- As of May 2021 42% of YoungStar-participating facilities across Wisconsin had a two-star rating, and only 11% had a five-star rating (the highest available).⁴
- Only two in five Milwaukee families live near a facility with a YoungStar rating of three or higher.⁵
- People with higher incomes have better access. Across Wisconsin, ZIP Codes with the lowest rates of child poverty have the greatest availability of both high-rated slots and overall slots.⁷
- High-quality providers are disproportionately sparse in rural areas, even after accounting for a lower population of young children.⁷
- Parents and caregivers who work outside of 9-to-5 hours — approximately a third of all working parents with kids under 6 years old¹⁰ — have even fewer options for affordable, high-quality care that meets their needs.⁵

There are also barriers for facilities to improve their quality. The costs to implement changes can be prohibitive. In addition, certain state regulations contradict YoungStar guidelines for things like building safety features, which can negatively impact their YoungStar rating.

Early education and childcare facilities are also facing staffing shortages, under-training, and administrative requirements that increase costs but do not improve quality or raise essential staff wages.⁸ Low wages for workers make retention and high-quality staffing difficult, but existing costs to families and insufficient state investment make it difficult for providers to raise wages without further increasing the cost to families.⁹

EARLY EDUCATION AND CHILD WELFARE

Access to childcare, particularly early childhood education, is important for parents' ability to work and care for their children. Unfortunately, lack of access is closely linked to parental neglect and can make it harder for parents involved with the child welfare system to close their cases.

- Difficulty finding childcare is a stronger predictor of maternal neglect than most other factors, including the mother's age, mental health, drug use severity, and personal history experiencing abuse.²
- In Wellpoint's experience, neglect cases often involve working parents who can't afford childcare leaving young children alone or with insufficient supervision while they go to work. This common form of neglect is preventable.
- Supporting access through subsidies and other assistance helps parents with child welfare cases make positive changes. States with more accommodating childcare subsidy rules regarding prioritization, copay waivers, and work requirement waivers for families involved in the child welfare system have fewer child removals than those with stricter rules, which has long-term positive impacts for many families.²

Meanwhile, childcare needs are also the highest documented unmet need for kinship and foster caregivers.² At Wellpoint, we see the challenges caregivers face and the consequences of a lack of access. Some rules governing Wisconsin Shares can make it harder for foster parents and kinship caregivers to send kids to preschool:

- If a foster parent or kinship caregiver takes in a child who receives Supplemental Security Income (disability) benefits, they lose eligibility for Wisconsin Shares, often causing untenable financial strain.
- In a two-adult foster household, if neither caregiver is employed they become ineligible for Wisconsin Shares regardless of their age.
 - For working age, non-disabled caregivers, this can make it harder to find a job, as they can't afford to leave children alone while interviewing or training without pay.
 - Many grandparents or other elderly kin and like-kin caregivers can't afford to pay out-of-pocket to send children to preschool. This removes opportunities for children to access the benefits of early childhood education and for caregiver respite.
- The process for kinship caregivers to be approved for Wisconsin Shares can take months, disrupting or even ending placements if they cannot afford unsubsidized services.
 - Administrative staff in local and county offices sometimes mistakenly deny subsidies because they aren't aware that subsidies are based on the birth parents' income, not the caregiver's.

- Unlike blood relative kinship caregivers, like-kin caregivers are not eligible for any assistance at all, including Wisconsin Shares, until they get approved for licensure. Wellpoint sometimes can help cover the gap, but it's not a sustainable model.

Despite challenges, Wisconsin Shares and YoungStar have made significant progress towards improving access to and quality of early care and education. For example, 75% of Wisconsin Shares participants are able to send their children to YoungStar-designated “high quality” programs.⁴ However, barriers to affordable, high quality early childhood education persist for many families. Removing these barriers will help ensure that *all* children have the opportunity to thrive.

WELLPOINT CARE RECOMMENDS

Access to high quality early education and care helps caregivers, positively impacts critical child wellbeing outcomes, and helps build strong, healthy, and prosperous communities.

- **Invest in providers** so they can afford to attract and retain highly qualified staff with better pay, without further increasing the cost to families.
- **Invest in expanding high-quality, subsidized offerings:** support existing facilities so they can raise their YoungStar quality rating and establish more high-quality facilities in underserved and unserved areas.
- **Include socioemotional skills training** for all childcare and early childhood education providers.
- **Invest in efforts to assist parents and caregivers** with navigating the Wisconsin Shares application process.
- **Improve relevant DCF and county staff training** to ensure that kinship caregivers are not incorrectly denied Wisconsin Shares subsidies.
- **Update rules to ensure that elderly out-of-home caregivers and caregivers with a disability that makes them unable to work remain eligible for Wisconsin Shares.**
- **Update rules to ensure that caregivers for children receiving SSI benefits are also able to receive childcare assistance.**
- **Update facility regulations to eliminate discrepancies with YoungStar guidelines, and remove or update stipulations that increase costs without improving child safety.**

Investing in affordable, high quality early childhood education helps working families now and will support strong, healthy, and prosperous individuals and communities in the long term.

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ABOUT WELLPOINT CARE NETWORK

Wellpoint Care Network is an evolving, community-facing human services organization based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. As a national leader in recognizing and addressing the impact of trauma, Wellpoint has been caring for children for more than 170 years.

Championing families, Wellpoint Care offers a comprehensive array of prevention, intervention and crisis resources to facilitate equity, learning, healing and wellness by restoring the connections that help children and families thrive.

Learn more at wellpointcare.org.

