

FIVE WAYS | to Improve the Quality of Early Care and Education

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President Obama's [early learning initiative](#) proposal includes strategies to increase access to high-quality preschool and expand the Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership program serving infants and toddlers. While Congress will debate plan funding and implementation, research provides solid guidance for bolstering quality across the diverse array of early care and education settings and programs. As the country considers a historic expansion of early care and education opportunities for young children, Child Trends offers a list of five ways to improve their quality:

1

Focus first on children's safety, health, and happiness.

Regardless of setting, children's safety, health, and happiness are the non-negotiable elements of quality care and education. Minimizing risk and maximizing children's opportunities to engage with teachers, caregivers, other children, and the world around them are essential strategies for promoting physical health and social-emotional, language, and cognitive development. Rigorous licensing regulations and regular monitoring of programs are essential. Yet a [review of existing state regulations](#) indicates that current protections for children are inadequate.

2

Support the early care and education workforce.

The administrators, teachers, and caregivers working with young children each day are at the center of creating high-quality early care and education. The current [workforce](#) has a low education level, and average annual incomes for some workers are under the federal poverty level for a family of four, despite efforts to promote higher qualifications and access to [professional development](#). [Further efforts](#) should target improvements in the quality and content of early childhood education preparation programs; opportunities for supervised internships and student teaching; ongoing [professional development](#) that is rigorous and relevant; compensation parity; and [coaching](#), consultation, and mentoring that facilitates the application of new knowledge to everyday practice.



Use observations and assessments to support every child's needs across all developmental domains.

High-quality programs regularly collect information about children's [physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development](#). The [National Research Council](#) has published guidance on choosing and using child assessments that are appropriate for children's developmental, [cultural and linguistic characteristics](#). The results of assessments should guide communications with parents, teaching strategies, curricula, and activities to help each child learn and develop in the way that works best for him/her. Ideally, such assessments would also align with [states' guidelines](#) on what children should know and be able to do upon kindergarten entry.



Create a culture of continuous quality improvement.

High-quality early care and education programs never stop improving. Continuous improvement starts with program leaders who engage themselves and staff in reflecting on strengths and growth areas through self-assessments, feedback from colleagues and parents, and data collected about the quality of their program, classroom, or child care home. Professional development and technical assistance can be linked to growth areas, and programs as a whole can annually update goals, objectives and strategies for improving services. [State Quality Rating and Improvement Systems](#) offer quality standards, professional development supports and incentives to guide the quality improvement process.



Build partnerships to support quality.

Quality early care and education programs are supported by a larger [early childhood service system](#) that includes access to health care and medical homes for young children, social-emotional development and mental health services that focus on prevention and intervention, comprehensive parent engagement that is responsive to parents' needs, and family support services to help families access resources and build their capacity to support their children's development. An [effective early childhood system](#) is dependent on [strong partnerships among early childhood settings](#) and across service-delivery systems; coordination of resources; and alignment of standards, which are critical for promoting quality early care and education programs that can meet the full range of children's and families' needs.

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