

The nagging issues of quality, accessibility, and affordability

Searching for a Solution to the Child Care Trilemma

by Richard Fiene

Every day we read about child care crises: Parents cannot find adequate care. There is not nearly enough quality child care. Qualified teachers are leaving for public school jobs where they can increase their salaries by 20-30%. Staff turnover is at 30-40%. Research tells us the majority of care in the United States is mediocre at best. All these issues point to the trilemma of quality, accessibility, and affordability that has been nagging at American child care for at least the past decade or two.

A solution to the trilemma equation in child care of quality, accessibility, and affordability has been difficult to address. In their campaign for adequate compensation for early childhood staff, the National Association for the Education of Young Children has documented the loss of the most highly qualified early childhood professionals to public school early childhood programs and to other professions. Because of low wages, early childhood staff cannot live on their teaching salary alone without supplementing it with other forms of employment. This is an impassioned issue because so much is at stake — staff-

child ratios, ability of parents to afford child care, and availability of sufficient care. Staff-child ratios, for certain, has been one of the sacrosanct surrogates of quality viz a viz the regulatory system and is the key to the solution of the trilemma. The research over the past 20 years clearly demonstrates the relationship between the number of children and the number of adults in a child care setting.

In the past as one alters the quality portion of the child care trilemma equation, this impacts both the accessibility and affordability portions of the equation. If the accessibility or affordability portions are altered in

any way, the quality portion of the equation is changed. There is a winner on one side of the equation but there are also always losers on the other side of the equation. There has not been a viable solution in which compensation can be increased to staff with no equivalent cost increase to parents, while at the same time increasing the number of children served. This article proposes a potential solution to this nagging problem.

A new concept (trilemma solution — tying compensation to staff quality without increasing cost to parents) is being proposed. This concept needs to be well researched, it is not one that state licensing administrators should think of in terms of making changes in policy at this point. There



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are too many issues related to waiving regulations, burnout of staff, and impact on children and teachers — short term and long term — that need to be ascertained before the policy implications are discussed. As a footnote to this proposal, this concept being proposed is for preschool care and not for infant or toddler care.

Trilemma Solution: A New Concept

The potential solution to the trilemma is to begin with the quality sector. Quality of the program is tied to staff quality and the number of staff to children (the staff line item is the most costly portion of a child day care budget as well). Higher education, direct training in early childhood or child development, and more years of experience generally correlate with a higher quality level of care. The more highly qualified staff a program has, the higher the quality of the overall program.

Most regulations address the adult-to-child ratio from an absolute (linear) standpoint. There is a specific ratio based upon the ages of children served. The adult-to-child ratio does not take into account any qualifications related to staff. In fact, most states cancel out the difference in education by equating it to experience so that the following scenario plays out:

Staff Qualifications			Children-to-Adult Ratio
Education		Experience	
AA	+	4 years	10-1
BA	+	2 years	10-1
MA		none	10-1

However, another spin on the above is the following example, a staff person with a master’s degree in early childhood, with 30 hours per year of in-service workshops and 10 years of experience cares for the same number of children as an entry level bachelor degree staff person, with 6 hours per year of in-service workshops and no experience:

$$\text{Staff 1} = \text{MA} + 30 \text{ hours in-service} + 10 \text{ years experience} = 10-1 \text{ ratio}$$

$$\text{Staff 2} = \text{BA} + 6 \text{ hours in-service} + \text{no experience} = 10-1 \text{ ratio}$$

If a state were to address the adult-to-child ratio from a relative (non-linear) standpoint, taking into account the qualifications of staff, a very different scenario could occur. For example, the following could occur (for ease of presentation, only educational qualifications and years of experience are addressed here):

Year of Experience

Staff Qualifications	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
AA					10-1					11-1
BA									11-1	12-1
MA										12-1

In the research literature, more advanced degrees by themselves do not necessarily correlate with a higher level of care. Direct in-service training in ECE/CD needs to be entered into the equation. (See Figure 1.)

The implications for such a model have tremendous cost and availability enhancements. On the availability side, as ratios go higher, more children can be served. As these ratios increase, more revenue can be brought into a program which can then be used to pay for the higher qualified staff person. By using this approach, however, no additional cost of service is passed on to the parents or the program. The unit cost stays the same, only more children per qualified staff person are served.

At a practical level, taking Figure 1 into consideration, how would this really work? Let’s take a classroom of 4 year olds — 10 children with a 10-1 ratio. The teacher has a master’s degree with 10 years of experience and has been taking continuing education credit. The teacher has an annual salary of \$20,000 per year. The unit cost for preschool care is \$3,500 per year. To implement the concept, the teacher with the master’s degree would be the individual we want to potentially impact in the following manner:

The ratio in the classroom would move from 10-1 to 11-1 with an additional 4 year old being allowed to enroll. It is assumed that there is sufficient space (35-40 square feet per child) for the additional child. It is also assumed that \$500 of the \$3,500 is for the additional cost related to having the child in the classroom. The remaining \$3,000 would go to the teacher as a permanent salary increment (the center would have to agree to this) — the teacher’s salary would go from \$20,000 to \$23,000 per year. This would be a 15% increase in salary.

By using the relative adult-child ratio as stated above, taking quality of staff into account when determining ratios, this model could provide a potential solution to the child day care trilemma of quality, accessibility, and affordability. Quality increases by having more qualified staff in those classrooms with lower ratios.

It could be argued that by having lower ratios, quality will be lowered as well. This has been demonstrated in the research literature. However, with the model presented here, this would only occur when the most highly qualified staff were in these classrooms. Higher ratios would have to be maintained in those classrooms with

Figure 1
Qualifications and Training Tied to Compensation

Staff Qualifications	Years of Experience or Number of Training Courses									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
AA	10-1			10-1->11-1 + \$3,000 salary increase						11-1
BA	11-1 + \$3,000			11-1->12-1 + \$3,000						12-1 + \$3,000
MA	12-1 + \$3,000			12-1>13-1 + \$3,000						13-1 + \$3,000

No additional cost would be charged to parents. Compensation for staff increases are totally from the additional children served per classroom.

staff who have lower qualifications. More children in the end could be served. Program income would increase. The additional dollars would go to pay the higher qualified teacher. This would also help to promote a professional development system. The more highly trained, experienced, and educated teachers would be paid a higher salary based upon the additional children. Parents, however, would not have to pay more because the additional income is from more children rather than a higher unit cost.

Conclusion

As dollars become tighter, more creative regulatory policy based upon research will need to be employed. This model takes into account the latest early childhood research and suggests a revision in how states' regulatory policies related to staff-to-child ratios are determined. Research clearly shows the linkage between the quality of programs being directly influenced by staff quality and number of staff to children. This model takes this into account and addresses several issues related to affordability and accessibility at the same time. (See Figure 2.)

This concept is one that needs to be fully researched. Hopefully, researchers, center based administrators, and state policy administrators can partnership together. This concept has as many questions as it does promise and potentially as many drawbacks if not well researched. As stated earlier, and I want to emphasize this, this is not a suggestion for state licensing administrators to begin to waive staff-child ratio regulations and make this state policy. It is suggested, however, that on a limited basis within a research context this concept be tested to examine the benefits and the drawbacks. Will this impact staff turnover?

Will the additional dollars be sufficient to keep our most qualified early childhood teachers in child care?

As a final footnote or afterthought to what has been proposed in this article, I want to be very clear that this proposal is an intermediate solution but not a long-term solution to solving the trilemma in child care. This is a very controversial proposal. I have had professionals argue passionately on both sides. However, given the present state of economics, I see this as a solution to hopefully keep our most qualified staff in child care until additional dollars can be found. Increased compensation not tied to staff-child ratios is the solution, but I do not see that happening realistically in the near future.

Figure 2
Child Day Care Trilemma's Potential Solution

- ✓ Links training to compensation
- ✓ Develops a professional development system
- ✓ No additional cost to parents
- ✓ Links training to quality
- ✓ Ties quality to regulations through increased responsibility
- ✓ Links quality to accessibility and affordability