

The importance - and cost - of quality child care

A report put out by the Central NH Regional Planning Commission called, "Child Care Keeps NH Working; The Economic Impact of Child Care in the Central New Hampshire Region" was recently released. The study found that in July 2004, the 96 licensed child care providers in the central region served 4,083 children, allowed parents to collectively earn \$21,750,666 per year and returned \$6,200,000 to the local economy in goods and services purchased. Child care is a necessary part of our society and is the industry on which all other businesses and industries rely. When parents can't find child care or rely on providers who are inexperienced or unreliable, the parents become anxious, frustrated often finding they have to miss work, which results in lost dollars for businesses. Few people, including providers themselves, realize how important this industry is to the economy of this state and country. Yet people in this industry continue to make some of the lowest wages in any industry and often have few, if any, benefits.

If you are a parent using child care, thinking about using child care or if you employ parents using a child care provider, it is hoped that a clearer understanding of the expectations our society has of people in this industry will be gained from this article. The expectations are impressive, as they should be but compensation for these expectations has got to be addressed as turnover in this industry affects, not only the children and their parents, but also the economy of this state.

Most child care providers are far more than babysitters. Besides allowing parents to work, a provider is a child's first teacher. Educated and trained providers are knowledgeable in child development, which allows them to understand a child's behavior and respond in a way that is appropriate. This knowledge enables a teacher to stay calm when a child becomes frustrated, encourage growth through "logical and natural" consequences in a safe environment and understand when a child is frustrated, tired, bored, overwhelmed and may just need some quiet time or some special attention. Activities and expectations will be geared to a child's ability.

A trained and experienced provider will create an environment that will nurture and stimulate a child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth. They will provide toys and activities that will support a child's interests and abilities so that a child doesn't become bored, frustrated and overwhelmed. Activities will be varied to include art, music, science, pre-math and pre-reading skills. Lots of books will be available and lots of time will be spent reading to the chil-

dren. Children will be encouraged to move, both inside and outside and good nutrition habits will be introduced.

Providers are also expected to have good communication skills, enabling them to work with parents and co-workers to create an environment that is loving and nurturing, no matter what is going on in their personal lives. Licensed providers are expected to be nutritionists and offer healthy meals and teach healthy eating habits. All licensed providers are required to have at least one person on staff to be trained in CPR and First Aid. They are expected to administer all types of medication (some that nurses won't administer) with little or no training. They are expected to be able to identify developmental problems and health concerns and know how to refer parents to appropriate services so that the child can be evaluated and offered special services if necessary. Many centers and caregivers will continually assess and track a child's development, keep portfolios and offer parent conferences.

Quality care is important for the well-being of our children, the mental well-being of the parents and the financial well-being of business and industry. To offer safe and nurturing care, the people in the child care industry have to be educated and trained. Having a child doesn't automatically make a person a good parent. Taking care of children doesn't automatically make a provider a good provider. This can only happen with education and experience and most college classes cost between \$600 - \$800 in this state. Most providers make between \$8.00 and \$12.00 an hour (\$16,640 - \$24,960 annually if working 40 hours a week) which is not considered a livable wage in this state. Is this really the way we should be thanking child care provider for all we expect of them?

Information for this article was provided by Early Learning New Hampshire. The organization is committed to ensuring that all New Hampshire children have the opportunity to reach their full potential by expanding access to affordable quality child care and early education, supporting the child care industry; business public-private partnerships; and helping families balance work and family.

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