

WHAT KINDS OF INFORMATION DO PARENTS NEED FOR CHOOSING CHILD CARE IN A DIVERSE SOCIETY?

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PARENTS MUST BALANCE many hopes and needs for their children when choosing child care. Location, cost, program philosophy and curriculum, the reputation of the caregivers, etc., all come into play. While all programs would ideally expose children to the five Principles of Quality Care in a Diverse Society, different types of care settings may be more effective at imparting different principles, and many programs do not yet come close to touching on them. Making this decision is complex, requiring thought about a child's individual personality and what is happening in his or her environment. For parents who are not fluent in English, bilingual or home language child care may be a higher priority. Other families may choose an ethnically diverse care setting because their children would otherwise have no opportunities to be exposed to different kinds of people. And as we have discussed elsewhere, many parents do not feel that attention to their child's racial, linguistic or cultural needs can be expected from the child care setting.

Typically a family must weigh decisions about appropriate child care more than once during their children's young years. Many families use more than one type of care. Families also need to change care because of changes in their economic situation or residence. What a child needs in terms of a care setting may also change over time as he or she develops. As of now, we found that families are basically on their own to figure out the appropriate fit between their children's needs, their family circumstances and values, and the child care setting.

Although the group of parents we interviewed was relatively small and not a representative sample, we do know generally about the sources of information these parents used to find out about child care options. Although most parents use several sources of information -the Yellow Pages, employers,

social service agencies, resource and referral agencies, pediatricians - the majority of the parents we interviewed based their final decisions on the recommendations of friends or family. Interestingly, it was not uncommon that the friend or family member recommending care was a child care teacher herself. We cannot know the content of the information exchange among friends and family about child care, but it appeared from our interviews that information about quality care with regards to race, language and culture is lacking in the exchange.

Families need more information, both before choosing a program as well as while attending a program, in order to make the best choices for care in a diverse society.

WHAT DO PARENTS NEED TO KNOW?

1. Child development relating to race, language and culture:

- How is caregiving influenced by culture - their own and that of the caregiver?
- How do children learn second languages and become bilingual?
- How do children develop racial and cultural identity?
- How do children develop prejudice and bias?

2. Child care options in their area:

- What is the philosophy and approach of the program in terms of race, language and culture?
- What languages are spoken by the provider or teachers in the program?

3. Supporting their child in the program and working with the caregiver(s):

- What can parents do to bring up issues of race, language, culture or bias with the program staff?
- How can parents bring their own culture and language into the program?

HOW CAN PARENTS BE INFORMED?

Information to parents about the role care can play in helping children develop an understanding of race, language and culture is critical for them to make a solid decision about where their child should be enrolled. Child care facilities as well as other institutions are important sources of this type of information. It may seem like an overwhelming challenge to get this information to the millions of parents who have one or more children with a child under six years old (there are over 10 million in California), when they speak dozens of languages, and are very busy with work, school and family. Individual programs are important sources of information about all aspects of child care and child development, but they cannot be wholly responsible for informing parents, for several reasons. First, many programs do not have the information themselves about the implications of race, culture and language in early care and education. Second, parents need information before they get into a program, so that they can make an informed choice. Currently, however, there are few mechanisms for ensuring that all parents have the information they need to make the choices that are best for them and their children.

There are two aspects to the challenge of informing parents. First, what are the best methods for conveying the information-brochures, videos, classes, radio, hotlines? What languages are needed? What is the most crucial information that will assist parents in making the best choices for their families? Second, what agencies or individuals are best suited to deliver the information? There are a variety of agencies and individuals who have regular contact with parents - resource and referral agencies, hospitals/pediatricians, prenatal classes, parenting classes, libraries and school districts, to name a few. What kind of preparation do these service providers need to competently discuss child care and diversity issues with the parents?

Further research is needed to answer these questions. Organizations or individuals may currently produce some information about language, race and culture in early childhood education aimed at parents, but it is not being disseminated widely. Coordination of this information is needed, as well as increased research into the issues themselves.

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