RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

Aspects of Well-being for the Child Care and Early Education Workforce

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Key Highlights



- Child care and early education (CCEE) state and program leaders can consider investing in evidence-based supports for the CCEE workforce to promote multiple aspects of well-being.
- Recent research has focused on a more holistic definition of CCEE workforce well-being that captures different aspects of well-being, such as physical health; mental and emotional health; workplace relationships; and respect, recognition, and compensation.
- There are research-based supports for promoting these different aspects of CCEE workforce well-being, including:
  - Workplace-based initiatives to promote physical and mental health,
  - Improvements to the work environment, and
  - Increased compensation.

Overview

Understanding the best ways to support the well-being of the child care and early education (CCEE)[a] workforce is important for states and CCEE programs. CCEE teachers and caregivers have demanding jobs and receive low compensation for their work[1]—a combination that often negatively affects their well-being. Research has linked CCEE workforce well-being to several important outcomes, including staff turnover,[2] responsiveness to children's needs,[3] and collaborations with families.[4] CCEE teachers and caregivers also have roles outside of their profession, and deserve to be well for themselves and their families. Research on CCEE teacher and caregiver well-being points to the effects they can experience personally, including high levels of stress, low access to food, unstable housing, and putting off medical care because of cost.[5] Historically, research on CCEE workforce well-being has primarily focused on poor mental health (specifically depressive symptoms) and its link to responsive caregiving.[b,6]

[a] Child Care and Early Education (CCEE) refers to caregiving and educational services for children birth to 13 years. This includes center and home-based settings for infants, toddlers, preschool- and school-aged children. CCEE refers to a larger age group than Early Care and Education (ECE), which consists of services for young children (birth-5, not yet in Kindergarten) only. ECE programs are included in the definition of CCEE.

[b] Responsive caregiving "refers to a parenting, caregiving, and teaching practice that is nurturing and responsive to an individual child's temperament and needs." https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/responsive-caregiving-effective-practice-support-childrens-social-emotional-development

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This research has focused on disparities in well-being among different types of teachers and caregivers, as well as disparities between the CCEE workforce and other sectors.[7,8] Only in the past decade have researchers focused on a more holistic definition of well-being, on ways to improve well-being, and on tailored strategies that may be needed to improve CCEE workforce well-being across different types of settings.[9] Below, we describe the various aspects of well-being that have been discussed in recent research and some examples of interventions or initiatives that promote CCEE workforce well-being.

Effects of COVID-19 on CCEE Workforce Well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges for well-being for the CCEE workforce, including poor mental health, increased financial insecurity, fears for their physical safety, and a diminished sense of accomplishment.

Physical Health. CCEE teachers and caregivers working in-person feared for their physical health. They reported worries about contracting COVID-19 from contact with children or coworkers with the virus, and fears of passing COVID-19 to those in their households.[10]

Mental Health. The CCEE workforce experienced the stress and trauma of the pandemic in both their personal and professional lives, which took a toll. In a national sample of over 82,000 CCEE teachers and caregivers in the spring of 2020, almost half (46%) of the providers reported elevated depressive symptoms, far above the national rate of 32 percent in 2020.[11] State-level data show an increase in mental health challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a survey of 3,355 CCEE teachers and caregivers in New Year, 38 percent reported that the pandemic affected their emotional health "a lot," and only 9 percent said their emotional health was not affected.[12] In Louisiana, CCEE teachers' and caregivers' self-reported levels of clinical depression almost doubled from 22 percent pre-pandemic (2018) to 38 percent during the pandemic (2020).[13]

Workplace Relationships. CCEE teachers and caregivers reported having additional job responsibilities, such as creating virtual learning curriculum and following safety and sanitation protocols. Despite the extra work, they reported a diminished sense that they were helping young children's development, citing the limitations of virtual learning for young children and the decreased time available for instruction and interaction.[14]

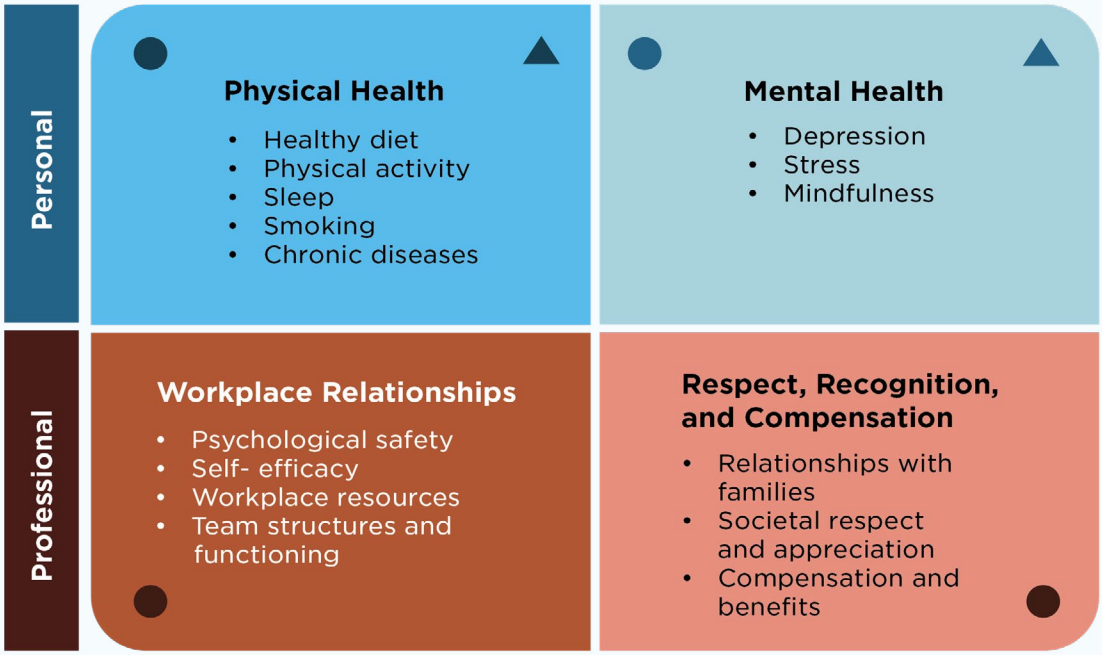
Respect, Recognition, and Compensation. The already-low compensation of the CCEE workforce was further compromised by COVID-related job insecurity, pay cuts, furloughs, and layoffs, with larger impacts on programs not receiving public funding. In a survey of Louisiana teachers and caregivers, 55 percent of the sample reported a decrease in their earnings and 74 percent did not have any sick leave.[15] In a study of CCEE programs in Massachusetts, family child care providers were most likely to report their income had been affected by the pandemic (87%) compared to just 7 percent of teachers and caregivers in Head Start and public pre-K.[16]

Personal and Professional Well-being of CCEE Teachers and Caregivers

Children do best when their teachers and caregivers are responsive to them,[17] yet CCEE teachers' and caregivers' responsiveness may depend upon their well-being, which can be impacted by the high demands placed on them.

For the CCEE workforce, research shows that there are several aspects of well-being including physical health; mental health; workplace relationships; and respect, recognition, and compensation (see Figure 1).[18-20] In the past decade, there have been studies about how the CCEE workforce is faring across all of these aspects of well-being. It is important to understand the influence of these different aspects when developing strategies to improve the overall well-being of the CCEE workforce. Figure 1 is followed by more detailed descriptions of each aspect of well-being, as well as examples of recent well-being initiatives for the CCEE workforce.

Figure 1: Aspects of CCEE workforce well-being



Sources:

▲ Informed by Lessard's (2021) literature review of health status of the CCEE workforce.[21]

● Informed by the Wilson et al. (2002) literature review of the well-being of Head Start teachers.[22]

Personal well-being

Physical health

Good physical health and nutrition are essential for CCEE teachers and caregivers who exert physical energy throughout long days of caring for children. CCEE teachers and caregivers are picking up and carrying children, crouching or kneeling to be at a child's level, and often sitting on the floor or in child-size chairs.[23] Responsive caregiving requires mobility, stamina, and flexibility. Unfortunately, the wear-and-tear of this work, compounded by other stressors, may lead to negative health outcomes for the CCEE workforce, who have higher-than-average incidences of chronic disease, obesity, pain, and frequent illness.[24-27]

Example of initiative to promote physical health

The Culture of Wellness in Preschools (CWP) program promotes physical activity through workplace challenges (e.g., walking challenges, fruit and vegetable consumption challenges), goal setting, and a workplace wellness champion. After participating in CWP, a sample of CCEE teachers and caregivers in Colorado reported increased knowledge about eating fruits and vegetables and increased physical activity in their workplaces.[28]

Mental health

When CCEE teachers and caregivers can be present in the moment with children, they are better able to respond to children's needs.[29] Many mental health conditions, such as depression, have symptoms that make being responsive more challenging by reducing motivation, making it difficult to concentrate and make decisions, and increasing frustration and irritability. Further, just like the children whom they care for, CCEE teachers and caregivers may experience stress and trauma, which negatively affects their emotional well-being and interactions with children.[30-32]

Example of initiative to promote mental and emotional health

The Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME) program is a multi-week professional development intervention that teaches CCEE teachers and caregivers about mindfulness strategies and provides opportunities for them to practice with children. Additional support is offered through a community of practice[c] with other teachers and caregivers. After participating, CCEE teachers and caregivers in Nebraska reported increased sense of mental well-being, lower rates of burnout, increased use of mindfulness practices, and increased use of strategies to regulate their own emotions when working with children.[33]

Professional well-being

Workplace relationships

The CCEE workforce collaborates with other adults and families. Having positive relationships with other adults, including the assurance you can speak up with ideas or share frustrations without being punished (referred to as psychological safety[d]), is important for CCEE teachers and caregivers.[34] Like all professionals, CCEE teachers and caregivers function better when they feel confident in their skills (i.e., self-efficacy) and when their workplace has sufficient resources for the job at hand.[35,36] Too often, teachers and caregivers report that their job demands are unreasonable in light of the limited resources and supports they have.[37]

[c] Communities of practice (CoPs) are, broadly defined, "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." Wenger-Trayner, E. and Wenger-Trayner, B. (2015) An introduction to communities of practice: a brief overview of the concept and its uses. https://www.wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice

[d] The term "psychological safety" is used in leadership and management (as well as other fields) to describe a sense that one is safe to share ideas with others without fear of negative consequences like embarrassment, being looked down on, or being shut out from the group. Kahn, William A. (1990). Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. Academy of Management Journal. 33 (4): 692–724. doi:10.2307/256287.

The overall conditions, or "climate," of the CCEE setting is influenced by the interactions of leadership and staff. A CCEE setting climate affects teachers' and caregivers' job satisfaction, as well as their interactions with children.[38]

Example initiative that promotes positive workplace relationships

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is a quality improvement model that aims to promote psychological safety and efficacy among staff as they work toward a shared goal. The BSC accomplishes these outcomes through a facilitated process of setting goals, trying new practices, and learning together in programs. In a study of the BSC in child care centers and Head Start programs in a large city, researchers found that directors, teachers and caregivers who rated psychological safety higher at their program had higher rates of participation in the BSC activities, indicating that having a "safe space" to share ideas and form more trusting relationships with other teachers helped them persist through the change process. Additionally, CCEE teachers and caregivers who started with lower rates of self-efficacy and had even moderate levels of participation in the BSC activities had higher self-efficacy at the end of the study.[39]

Respect, recognition, and compensation

For anyone, being treated with respect at work is an important part of workplace satisfaction. CCEE teachers and caregivers are in one of the lowest-paying occupations in the United States, with median wages below the federal poverty threshold.[40] Given their extremely low wages, CCEE teachers and caregivers may not feel that their work is sufficiently appreciated by society. There is also limited societal recognition of child care as a profession that requires skill and training.[41] Creating strategies to increase CCEE provider compensation and benefits could be an important way to acknowledge the unique contributions of the CCEE workforce. In addition, it is key that CCEE teachers and caregivers feel respected at work by co-workers, supervisors, families, and other professionals they encounter.

Example initiative that promotes positive workplace relationships

In Fairfax, Virginia, some CCEE teachers and caregivers were selected via lottery to receive a $1,500 Recognition Program payment funded by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) initiative. Eight months later, teachers and caregivers who received the payment were 11 percent less likely to have left their positions than providers who did not receive the payment. The largest impact was seen for center-based teachers and assistant teachers. Approximately 25 percent of CCEE teachers and caregivers who did not receive the payment in this sample had left their job eight months later. Teachers and caregivers reported that the payment made them feel appreciated and validated for the work that they do. They described using the money for basic needs like food, housing, and medication.[42] This is meaningful not only in promoting respect, recognition and compensation for teachers and caregivers, but also because turnover can negatively affect children's experiences in CCEE.

Additional resources

In 2021 and 2022, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) published several Information Memoranda (IM) about CCEE workforce well-being. This section provides links to these IMs and their guidance for lead agencies.

From Office of Child Care (OCC)

- Using CCDF to Improve Compensation for the Child Care Workforce (CCDF-ACF-IM-2022-02)

This IM provides guidance for Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) lead agencies for how CCDF and American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act CCDF Discretionary Supplemental funds may be used to raise compensation, including wages, benefits, and supporting post-secondary education.

From Office of Head Start (OHS)

- Strategies to Stabilize the Head Start Workforce (ACF-IM-HS-22-06)

This IM provides guidance to all Head Start and Early Head Start grant recipients on how Head Start funds may be used to increase compensation for Head Start staff, promote a positive working environment, and support educational attainment and career advancement,

- Supporting the Wellness of All Staff in the Head Start Workforce (ACF-IM-HS-21-05)

Similarly, this IM for Head Start and Early Head Start grant recipients outlines how local programs may use Head Start funds to support wellness with strategies that are in line with the Head Start Program Performance Standards, including promoting a culture of health and well-being, ensuring staff have adequate breaks and paid leave, fostering a work environment that promotes mutual respect and trust, and ensuring staff know their rights as employees.

From Office of Early Childhood Development (Preschool Development Grant Birth – 5)

- Instructions for Requesting Changes in the Existing Scopes of Work to increase support for the Early Childhood Workforce (PDG-B-5-ACF-IM-2022-01)

This IM provides guidance for current PDG B-5 grant recipients on how to change current scopes of work to include or increase strategies to support the workforce. Existing state examples are offered as illustrations of how grant recipients could adapt their current grant plans, including activities like wage studies, mental health initiatives, retention strategies, and approaches to career pathways and professional development.

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