Child Care on Screen: Ten Facts and Key Policy Milestones for Storytellers

To tell authentic stories about care on screen, creatives need context about the realities of child care in the United States and key policy moments over time.

By Vicki Shabo

The ten key facts and policy milestones in this resource help to provide writers with context about early care and learning in the United States. This background information is meant to inform writers' shaping of circumstances facing a family, business, or community on screen, avoid stereotypes, build more credible narratives, and tell richer stories.

Want to learn more about telling better child care stories? See our Re-Scripting Child Care and Early Learning On Screen guide.

Ten Facts About Early Care and Learning in the United States

1. Most parents need child care. At least two-thirds of children under age six–more than 14 million children–live in households where all parents work in the formal paid labor force. Other parents choose part-time, episodic, informal, or gig work because care is unavailable or unaffordable. Even families with stay-at-home parents have episodic child care needs. Sixty percent of children under age 5 receive some type of non-parental care each week.

2. Stay-at-home parents need relief and respect. Parents are rarely compensated for caring for their children, even though their labor holds significant economic value. Counter to media depictions of stay-at-home moms as white, affluent, and defined by the role, real-life households with stay-at-home moms tend to have higher rates of poverty and lower incomes than households with two working parents.

3. High-quality care—whether at home or in programs—is essential to children's development. The brains of infants', toddlers, and young children through age eight, develop faster than at any other life stage: From birth through age three, for example, children form more than one million new neural connections per second. Whether from a parent or care provider, social and emotional learning and nurturing care are critical to healthy development, with significant benefits to both children and parents.

4. Child care is one of a family's biggest expenses. Formal center-based child care costs, on average, more than $15,000 annually for an infant and over $12,000 for a four-year-old. Child care costs account for about 10 percent of a married couple's income and 33 percent of a single parent's. Care for two children costs more than mortgage or rent payments in nearly every state. Prices rose by 23 percent from 2020 to 2025, often outpacing inflation in housing and food costs. Many families use informal arrangements, with parents working opposite shifts or family, friends, or neighbors taking on care, largely because formal care is so unaffordable.

5. Child care programs are cash-strapped—and the sector is now threatened by private-equity firms prioritizing profit over safety, continuity, and care. Rising costs of child care for families do not mean higher profits for care providers–most of whom operate on one-percent margins. Overhead expenses include rent or mortgage, salaries for enough trained staff members to meet required child-to-adult ratios, facility upkeep, insurance, food, and supplies. When the COVID-19 pandemic sparked instability across child care centers, private-equity firms moved in to purchase them–and now run the vast majority of the 11 largest child care chains in the country. For-profit centers tend to focus on serving high-income families and may compromise child safety and risk closures that affect families and care workers.

6. Early educators play an essential role for children and parents, yet pay is low and providers are leaving the field. Child care workers earn an average of $15 per hour ($22 per hour in care centers), and workers are leaving the field for higher pay in retail and food service. Forty-three percent of child care workers have low enough incomes to qualify for public food, health care, and income support programs. Nearly half report not being able to afford enough food for their own families, and many report mental health challenges and burnout. A shrinking workforce affects families' ability to find care and centers' ability to meet staffing ratio requirements.

7. Child care demand far exceeds supply. Local supply dynamics vary considerably, but nationally, nearly half of children under six (46 percent) live in a so-called "child care desert"—a community where there are three or more children for every licensed spot in a child care center, a family child care home, a Head Start program, or a pre-K program. Rural communities are even more likely to face care shortages. To address staffing challenges, some policymakers are proposing or enacting rollbacks of required worker-to-child ratios, which could pose safety concerns.

8. For parents who work variable or non-standard schedules, child care is even more scarce. Just eight percent of child care centers and one-third of family care homes provide care during non-standard hours, and parents with unpredictable work schedules must either pay for a spot they won't use or face being unable to retain a spot they've reserved.

9. Child care shortages have ripple effects on businesses and the economy. Parents' inability to find child care keeps businesses from finding and retaining workers. Mothers' labor force participation plummeted in 2020 and remains inconsistent. Child care challenges lead to parents' absences and cutbacks in hours. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce recognizes child care availability as a business issue, and a recent study found $70 billion in economic losses due to workers' child care disruptions.

10. U.S. investment in child care lags behind that of other countries and spending on K-12 schools. Public funding for child care is standard practice in other countries, but U.S. funding is woefully insufficient at just $500 per child, compared to $14,000 in economically competitive countries. Most of the existing federal funding in the United States filters through states, which means that experiences of parents, providers, and children vary dramatically depending on where they live. Moreover, spending on early care and learning in the U.S. is far lower per student than spending on K-12, despite the critical brain development window for children under five.

POLICY MILESTONES

U.S. policymakers have made conscious choices about child care—at some moments, investing in care, in other times, retreating from it. To write authentic stories about families who navigate the complexities of care in the United States and the workers and systems that provide and support care, it's essential to understand how we got here. Here's a quick snapshot of key developments:

- **During World War II**, the federal government funded state and local child care centers so that women could work in factories in jobs vacated by men fighting in the war. More than 3,000 child care centers serving as many as 600,000 children operated in nearly every state.
- In **1965**, Head Start began as a summer program for young children from families with low incomes. By 1967, Head Start sites expanded to full-year programs offering both schooling and other services to parents and kids as an anti-poverty measure. While imperfect, Head Start was expanded to serve immigrant children and children with disabilities, and—while still underfunded—has historically received support and funding from lawmakers across party lines.
- In **1971**, Congress passed a bipartisan bill to establish a national child care system envisioning facilities across the country offering comprehensive educational, health, and nutritional support. President Nixon, pressured by conservative-values groups, vetoed the legislation. Tax legislation in this same era established a key part of the privatized system we have today, which perpetuates unequal support for families by income level since existing tax credits disproportionately benefit higher-income families.
- In **1990**, federal legislation established a system where federal dollars flow to states through the Child Care and Development Block Grant program, but the program has never been funded at the level of need. Moreover, this state-by-state approach means families' access to care varies considerably depending on state political climates and their different approaches to funding care; this affects children's eligibility for care, the quality of early learning, and provider pay.
- In **2020**, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal government offered temporary stabilization grants to child care programs to keep facilities open and increased child care block grant funding. These grants expanded access for families, reduced costs for parents and providers, and boosted educator pay.
- In **2021**, Congress considered, but ultimately failed to pass, new large investments in child care to address supply, affordability, and quality.
- In **2024**, when Congress failed to renew COVID-era federal funding, many states rolled back improvements. However, others stepped up to pass policies continuing support to parents and the child-care sector.

Currently, there are proposals to invest significantly in child care at the national level and in several states. Momentum is fueled by recent policy changes in states ranging from Kentucky to New Mexico to Vermont—showing the power of organizing, research, and storytelling in securing major wins that are benefitting parents, children, and educators. There's also some movement to regulate private equity firms' role in child care to curb the risks of harmful cost-cutting.

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