

# *Early Childhood Exchange*



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## ***Job Satisfaction of Child Care Workers in Wisconsin***

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How well do child care staff in Wisconsin like their jobs? Do they feel respected and supported by the general public for their work with children? What aspects of their jobs contribute to positive feelings about being a child care provider?

These are some of the questions that were explored by a 1988 study of licensed Wisconsin child care providers. The last issue of the *Early Childhood Exchange* presented information on the pay and benefits of child care providers based on the findings of that study. This issue will give you further information about the perceived personal costs and benefits of child care work and discuss practical considerations for maintaining a positive work experience with young children.

### **Who Participated in the Study?**

In May of 1988, 200 center directors, staff of 100 centers (553 teachers) and 200 family day care providers were randomly selected from the list of licensed child care programs in Wisconsin. Each was mailed a questionnaire with a stamped return envelope and a letter that explained the purpose of the study. A total of 353 questionnaires were returned to comprise the study sample.

The returned questionnaires reflected the types and number of child care programs that were operating across Wisconsin. This statewide and randomly selected sample gives us a fairly accurate profile of child care providers who worked in licensed

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programs in Wisconsin in 1988.

**How Satisfied Were Child Care Workers with Their Jobs?**

The questionnaire asked four questions about how well providers liked their job or would be willing to change jobs. Responses tell us that the majority of all child care providers are happy with their work. In fact, 33%, or about one out of every three center staff, and one out of every two family day care providers (58%) agreed that "I cannot think of any jobs for which I would exchange," or "I would not exchange my job for any other." (See Figure 1.) Similarly, 63% of center staff and 78% of family day care providers agreed with the statement, "I like my job better than most people like theirs." These percentages are very high compared to workers in most other occupations (McNichols et al., 1978).

We also asked the child care workers in our study to tell us in their own words "the most satisfying thing" about their jobs. Not surprising, the most common answers reflected themes such as watching children learn and grow, helping children learn skills and gain self confidence, or being a part of a child's development in some way. For many family day care providers, being able to stay home with their own children and being self-employed were additional personal benefits.

**Is Child Care a Career Goal of Most Providers?**

The majority of child care workers in Wisconsin's licensed programs enjoy their jobs and plan on making a career out of working with children. Three out of four (75%) said their job was "a career I expect to stay in." This view was somewhat less

**Figure 1. JOB SATISFACTION**

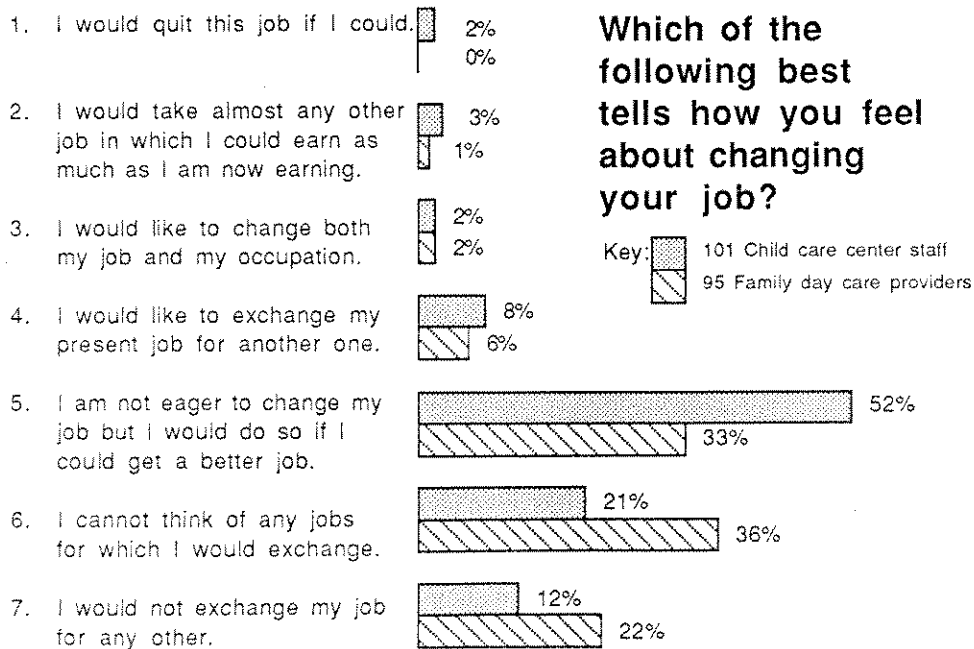
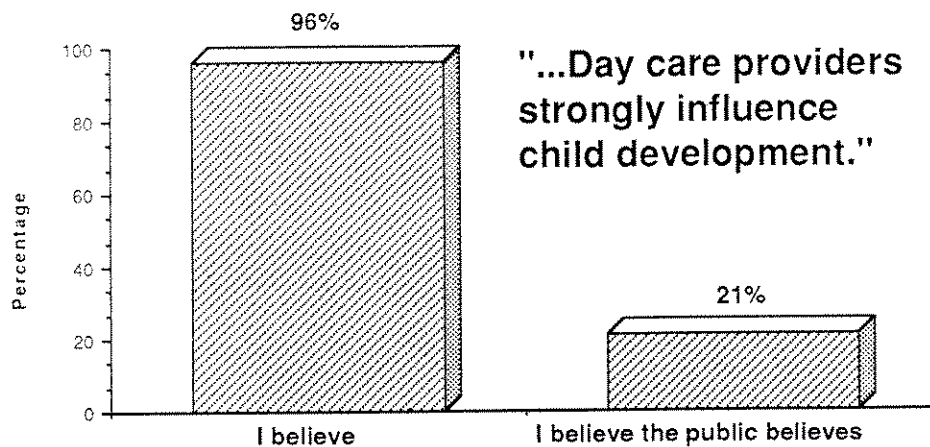


Figure 2. Child Care Provider's Beliefs



prevalent among center-based teachers who were new to their jobs.

So why does it matter if teachers view their jobs as a long term career or a temporary position? People who see their jobs as careers may personally invest more in their work than those who feel that their job is only temporary. The fact that so many child care workers in Wisconsin see their position as a career suggests a strong commitment to their work with children. This commitment was also apparent in their attitudes about the importance of their work with children, as shown in the next section.

### Is Child Care a Profession?

In the eyes of the large majority of child care workers, the answer to this question was an overwhelming **yes!** We asked the providers in our study to tell us whether they agreed or disagreed with four statements about child care, and how they thought the general public viewed these same statements.

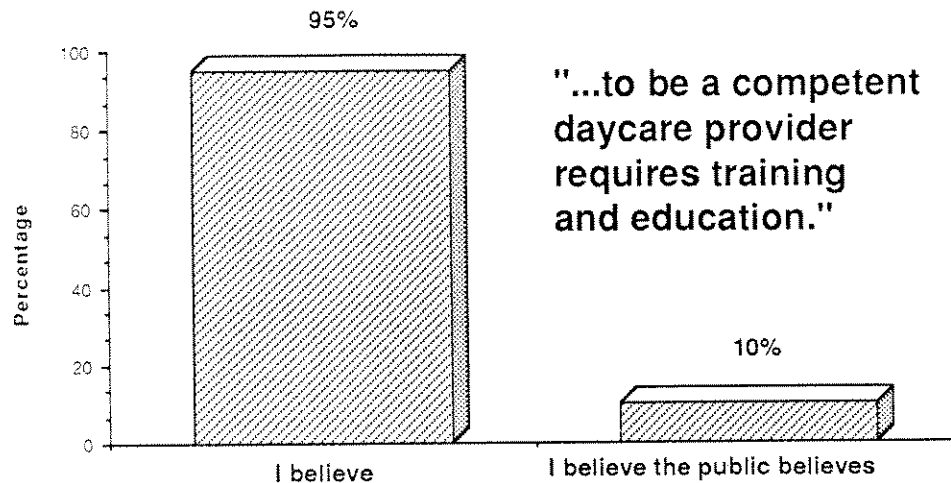
Nearly every child care teacher (99%), in centers and family day care alike, disagreed

with the statement, "Providers are basically just babysitters." In glaring contrast, nearly all (93%) agreed that the public does believe this.

A large majority of child care teachers (96%) believed that they strongly influence child development, but only one out of five believe that the public thinks that this is true. (See Figure 2.)

Research tells us that the teacher's formal education and training, even more than years of experience working with children, are important predictors of the development of intellectual, language, and social skills in children (Riley, 1988). The child care staff in our study already knew this to be true. Nearly all (95%) of the teachers agreed with the statement, "To be a competent day care provider requires training and education." Nine out of ten providers, on the other hand, felt that the public does **not** hold this belief. Similarly, 80% felt that the public thinks "anybody can care for children." Very few providers (1%) agreed with this statement. (See Figures 3 and 4.)

Figure 3. Child Care Provider's Beliefs



The beliefs expressed by the child care workers in our study paint a portrait of people who view their work with children as a profession that requires training and education to refine specific skills that best promote the development of children. In other words, child care workers strongly dispute the notion that child care is a babysitting service that anyone can do, and they feel misunderstood by a public that undervalues the difficulty and importance of their work.

While the majority of child care providers told us they enjoy their work with young children and see themselves in a career, their responses also tell us that, at least for some, staying in the field is a difficult choice. Consider these two comments by respondents:

*I'd be more content with my job and content to stay in the field if the respect and pay were equal to the amount of dedication and energy I put into my job.*

*If child care providers earned a liveable wage, I would make it a career goal. I cannot live on the wages provided.*

Making a decent living wage, belief in the importance and purpose of their work with children, and feeling that their work is valued and respected by the society, are at least some of the considerations for teachers in deciding whether to stay or leave the profession. These factors could help explain the large turnover of teachers in the field. The next section takes a closer look at why teachers may or may not feel content with their work.

### **What Aspects of Child Care Work Contribute to Job Satisfaction?**

In an effort to better understand why teachers might feel satisfied or dissatisfied with their jobs, we analyzed specific aspects of their work with children and how these related to job satisfaction. Because job settings are different for center-based and

family day care providers, they will be discussed separately.

**Center-based Staff.** The findings from our study tell us that teachers in public programs (primarily Head Start) are most satisfied with their jobs, followed by teachers in non-profit programs and then those in for-profit centers. Teachers who made higher wages were generally more satisfied with their jobs, except for those with higher education. To our surprise, we found that center-based child care workers with higher education were less satisfied with their jobs even though they made a better wage than teachers with less education. One explanation for this might be that staff with higher education may have alternative job opportunities available to them, presumably with better pay. The contrast to better-paying job options could make a career in child care teaching seem less appealing.

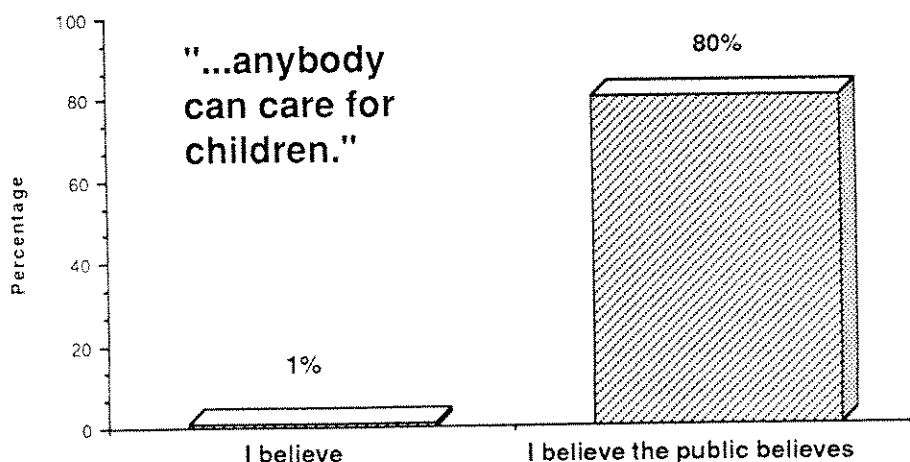
The rank or title of job position, such as Assistant Teacher or Head Teacher, did not seem to be important to job satisfaction. Assistant teachers were as satisfied with

their jobs as head or lead teachers. The ratio of children to teacher in the classroom did not appear to be particularly important for job satisfaction so long as the hourly wage was decent and the job included some opportunity for assuming responsibility.

What do we mean by opportunities to "increase responsibility" on the job? Four items in the questionnaire measured this. Teachers could agree or disagree that their jobs held the opportunity for them to "assume more responsibility in the classroom," "assume more administrative responsibility," "increase supervisory responsibility," and "train other adults."

Child care staff who felt that they had opportunities to assume or increase job-related responsibilities were more likely to report being satisfied with their jobs. This suggests that teachers who feel that their jobs give them a chance to develop new competencies and meet new challenges will probably be happier in their work. The ability to be autonomous and to assume

Figure 4. Child Care Provider's Beliefs



responsibility are two characteristics typical of professional careers. That teachers want opportunities to increase responsibility is fitting with their view of themselves as professionals.

**Family Day Care Providers** with more education, and who worked fewer hours each week, were slightly more satisfied with their jobs. In contrast to center-based teachers, hourly wage was relatively unrelated to job satisfaction for family day care providers.

The availability of professional support was the overwhelming single most important factor that contributed to job satisfaction for family day care providers. Providers who agreed that "if I had a problem at work, I know at least one person I can talk with and get advice from" were by far the most satisfied with their jobs. Given that many family day care providers are isolated from other child care professionals, this finding is highly significant. The opportunity for professional sharing and support, typical within center-based programs, is not nearly as accessible for family day care providers.

### **Implications: What Do These Findings Suggest?**

The findings about job satisfaction among Wisconsin child care providers have several implications. First, job satisfaction of center-based teachers was directly related to their wages. Given the very low average wage level (see Riley, 1990), and the estimated 30 percent annual employee turnover rate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1984), this finding has a policy implication: if the state wishes to increase either child care supply or quality, it will surely have to find a way to stimulate higher wages for child care staff. But, while wage contributes

to teachers' feelings of satisfaction, it is not the only thing. For center-based staff, opportunity to develop competence through increased responsibilities was linked to having positive feelings about their job.

Directors of center-based programs might therefore consider allowing their more experienced teachers to supervise and guide less experienced staff. Such an arrangement would utilize the talents and knowledge of more experienced teachers, thereby increasing their job satisfaction, while also nurturing the skills of the less experienced. Similarly, staff might like to supervise student teachers or volunteers in their classroom. Directors might also benefit from sharing some administrative duties with interested staff members.

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***If we want Wisconsin children to perform well in academics later, during the school years, we cannot afford to lose the best trained teachers from their preschool years.***

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By allowing teachers increased autonomy and responsibility in the workplace, directors will attend to the expressed desire of teachers to act as professionals, and might thus promote higher job satisfaction among their staff.

One surprising and alarming finding is that the most highly qualified child care teachers are the least satisfied with their jobs. The danger exists that the most highly trained teachers, who are likely to have other occupational options, are being driven away from child care because of their low wages. This should sound an alarm, given

the consistent research finding that the level of formal training of staff predicts children's gains in language, intelligence, and social skills (Riley, 1988). If we want Wisconsin children to perform well in academics later, during the school years, we cannot afford to lose the best trained teachers from their preschool years.

Our study clearly indicated that the formation of some system of support is critical for helping family day care providers feel more satisfied with their jobs. Social and professional gatherings can give providers a chance to find emotional support and exchange valuable and practical information with one another.

In fact, the development of "family day care systems" (by 1992) is one of the recommendations of Wisconsin's long range plan for child care (Hinrichs-Sanders et al., 1986). County directors of Social Services also recommended the development of support groups and technical assistance centers when they were polled in 1988 (Edie, 1988). And the "Update to the Long Range Plan" issued by the Day Care Advisory Committee to DHSS listed these family day care systems as one of the most impor-

tant unmet needs in Wisconsin child care.

There are some actions providers can take to make these recommendations a reality. First, they can reach out to other professionals in their area. In several parts of Wisconsin groups of family day care providers have already formed associations. Some of these are professional groups which provide toy lending libraries, regular inservices, referrals, and substitute providers for days off or sick days. Others of these groups are more informal, but meet regularly for mutual support and discussion. Some informal groups are organized by child care organizations, and some by the county Extension offices.

Second, providers can lobby for the implementation of more formal support systems such as resource centers or "Family Day Care Systems" that were recommended in the Wisconsin long range plan for child care. The state has, in fact, been investing in the development of resource and referral centers in recent years. The evidence of this study suggests that this investment may pay off in more satisfied child care workers, and better child care, in years to come.

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## **WLEX**

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