

Early learning reporting tip sheet

What are we talking about?

Glossary

Daycare: Avoid using this term because it could refer to daytime care for adults, and because some childcare occurs at night.

Childcare: A term that is often used when talking about the economy, with the emphasis put on places that keep a child safe while a parent or guardian is working. *Note that AP recently changed its style to make childcare one word instead of two.*

Early learning: The learning that occurs before a child reaches kindergarten – although it can include learning up to age 8. Many advocates argue all childcare should be early learning, and many preschools have curricula even for infants that outlines how teachers should interact with babies.

Preschool: In general, refers to a setting that emphasizes education.

Kinship care or family friend and neighbor care: Care that's provided by a family, friend or neighbor. It's sometimes paid and sometimes not.

Providers: Often used to refer to people who run childcare operations, whether they be in homes or centers.

Keep in mind...

- A majority of parents of young children are [not using formal childcare](#), and some [would keep it that way even if an affordable option were available](#).
- Don't leave parents and informal caregivers out of your coverage: there are [programs to support informal caregivers](#) and [parents](#) to set up children for future success.
- When parents are asked about what's most important to them, they [rank safety and trust highly](#).
- The goal of most preschool and early education before kindergarten is social-emotional development, not academic achievement. Many of the lessons are hands-on and play-based. In many preschools, teachers emphasize helping children develop autonomy and allow children to decide on daily activities and even what topics they'll tackle. A lot of early education advocates believe all school – or at least the early grades – should be more like preschool. See this [2017 story from the Hechinger Report](#) about K-12 schools adopting preschool philosophies.

Who pays for it?

Unlike the K-12 system, there is little in the way of public infrastructure to deliver childcare. No state requires a child to attend school before kindergarten and no state articulates a right to pre-kindergarten education, even though kindergarten expects more and more of children by the time they set foot in the classroom.

Story idea: The children entering kindergarten this year were born after the start of the pandemic. Their older peers have seen [a slump in math and reading scores](#) – and researchers believe that there's something beyond the pandemic in play. What kinds of new challenges have school districts faced with post-pandemic student cohorts? Have they changed their prekindergarten or kindergarten classes to adjust?

State + Local Government

States, counties, cities and school districts fund early learning in a wide variety of ways. Some provide universal pre-kindergarten, often in school buildings. Others heavily subsidize the cost of preschool and childcare for families.

Story idea: how are your state and local governments faring when it comes to providing prekindergarten? Are their efforts to expand it? What are the barriers?

Story idea: There are [several candidates for state and local office](#) this year that are running on pledges to invest more in childcare and prekindergarten. Are any of your local candidates making childcare pledges? Are they realistic? What could be some of the limitations of their plans?

Federal Government

There are two signature federal childcare programs housed in the Department of Health and Human Services. The federal government also invests considerably into childcare for members of the military, especially those living on bases.

Child Care Development Fund

The [Child Care Development Fund](#) gives money to states for childcare vouchers to help low-income households cover the costs. States can supplement these funds and expand who qualifies for them, but in general they fall far short of serving everyone who is eligible. Every state administers childcare funds differently.

Story idea: Many states are seeing more applications than ever for childcare subsidies. And many have to [cut back their voucher programs](#) because of the demand plus the end of pandemic relief funds. What's the status of your state's childcare assistance program? How is it

Story idea: The Trump administration is [rolling back many of the rules implemented during the Biden administration](#) that required states to pay more to providers – and to pay them based on enrollment, not attendance. How could the Trump administration changes impact child care providers in your community?

Head Start

[Head Start and Early Head Start](#) are a federally-funded programs that provides early learning for the neediest children, including those who live in low-income households, those in foster care and those who are unhoused. The federal government directly funds private and public operators to run the programs. It was [created as part of LBJ's War on Poverty](#), and is intended to be a comprehensive antipoverty program. There have been some calls to eliminate the program, and a draft budget leaked to the press in early 2025 [called for its cancellation](#). But after backlash, the administration [recommitted to the program](#).

There are two Head Start programs that serve specific populations of children. **Migrant or Seasonal Head Start** serves the children of farmworkers and often stay open longer than traditional Head Start centers to accommodate their parents's long work days. **American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start** is for children of federally recognized tribes.

Story idea: Head Start programs around the country are [facing an array of pressures](#). Many are facing staff shortages and have had to cut enrollment. Others are deeply concerned about the Trump administration's efforts to kick out undocumented children and to bar DEI programs. What sorts of challenges are the Head Start programs in your community facing?

Military childcare

The [military childcare system](#) is considered a model for how a broader public program could operate. The military operates several childcare centers around the country for the children of service members, and every center must meet national accreditation standards. The military will also subsidize care for families who use childcare off-base.

Employers

Some [employers are offering free- or low-cost childcare](#) for their employees, or are directly subsidizing childcare costs. Employers can get tax breaks from states and the federal government for providing childcare benefits. Employers providing on-site childcare have not been able to keep them open. Notably, several [hospitals, universities and school districts](#) did away with their on-site childcare programs.

Story idea: It's still pretty unusual for employers to offer on-site childcare. If you have a large employer in your community that's doing just that, you might talk to them about whether tax credits played a role in them offering it and talk to employees about how it's working for them.

Families

The vast majority of money that flows to private childcare and early education providers comes from parents and families.

Parents and other adults in the household are [often footing the bill](#) for formal and informal childcare. In many cases, childcare is [so expensive that its cost exceeds what a parent would earn](#), forcing that parent to stay home.

Story idea: how is the cost of childcare figuring in to family budgets now that prices for so many things, including groceries and fuel, have risen? Will it impact how people will vote this year?

Epilogue: Coronavirus Relief

In three separate covid relief bills, Congress allocated a record \$53 billion for childcare. \$24 billion went to a brand new program called the childcare Stabilization Fund to help childcare providers keep their doors open, while the rest went to expanding the CCBDG.

Navigating early learning locally

The National Association for the Education of Young Children [has affiliates in every state](#) and their staff will be well-versed in challenges around childcare and early learning.

The [National Head Start Association](#) has chapters in every state, and state leaders can be helpful in connecting you with local operators. NHSA also provides state-by-state data breakdowns.

As a condition of getting federal funding for childcare subsidies, every state must offer help in connecting parents with high-quality childcare providers through what are called Child Care Research and Referral organizations. Sometimes these services are provided by the state but they are often contracted to local social service providers. CCR&R's, as they are known, can be great resources for journalists too and can help them connect with providers and families and give them background on how funding changes are impacting low-income households. You can find your local CCR&R – along with information about state licensing requirements – on [this Child Care Aware of America site](#).

More general early education resources.

Newsletters and news outlets:

[LAist's Early Childhood Newsletter](#)

[Hechinger Report's Early Childhood Newsletter](#)

[zero2eight](#) is a news outlet dedicated solely to early education run by the74.

[The Family Frontier](#) is a newsletter by family and child policy expert Eliot Haspel.

[Early Learning Nation](#) is an independent online magazine dedicated to covering early learning with a monthly newsletter.

[The Better Life Lab](#) is a project of the left-leaning think tank New America to produce journalism about work and care.

[Using and Vetting Data for Better childcare Journalism](#) is a great piece that Rachel Cohen of Vox wrote for EWA about how to avoid cliches and inject nuance in to your childcare coverage. The [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) surveys parents on childcare access and a number of other topics related to early learning.

[The National Database of Childcare Prices](#) was assembled by the Labor Department and includes data on childcare pricing for nearly every county in the U.S. alongside household income to show how affordable childcare is.