

# ed

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*Improving Early Child Care and Education*

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'A safe haven' is just the beginning in child care and education

# SAFE HAVEN

"As we enter the 21st century it is clear that we are changing our view of early child care from one of a safe haven to one of developmental enhancement.

We need to make sure that our regulations reflect that changed view."

— Jim Gallagher



*A study of child care regulations in four states – California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina – shows that state policies generally set higher standards for child protection than for enhancement of development, according to a new study by researchers at the Frank Porter Graham Center at UNC-Chapel Hill.*

"Such regulations support the image of child care programs as being a safe haven rather than for development enhancement. The limited requirements for child care personnel and for community interaction also encourage that image," said **Jim Gallagher**, one of the researchers on the study.

He said, "These minimum standards departed substantially from professional judgements about what is needed in child care settings."

The study analyzed the rules and regulations for center-based care from the four states that had previously been studied for the national Cost, Quality and Outcomes study.

Investigators developed and applied rubrics to compare policies with recommended practices in the areas of structure, operations, personnel and context.

Researchers did a separate analysis comparing regulations for protecting the child versus regulations for enhancing child development.

"While we recognize that state standards represent minimum requirements, it is still important to focus on what we consider as "minimum" for

child care and child development," said **Robin Rooney**, another researcher with the project.

It appears easier, from these findings, to establish standards for child protection than for enhancement of child development, she said.

"This may be because there is a strong consensus about just what is required for protection of safety and freedom from abuse than about what is needed to enhance development, or it can also mean that, as a society, we are not quite determined to use child care programs to enhance child development through regulations. We can easily agree on safety standards, but we may differ from one another on how to best help the child reach higher levels of cognitive, social, and motor development," said Rooney.

These findings indicate that the minimum standards for these four states do not include many standards for child development that would be considered important by professionals in the field, Gallagher said.

"While we should be cautious in assuming a causal relationship between minimal state standards and the number of inadequate or mediocre child care settings that we found in these four states (as well as some outstanding programs), it seems likely that hard pressed directors of child care centers will meet the minimum standards first and then consider what else they should be doing," he said.

"If we do wish for a strong role for child care centers to enhance development, then some higher and more specific development enhancement standards need to be written," said Gallagher.

**Researcher's recommendations**

**Eliminate lowest standards**

These analyses point out that “we still are a long way from matching child care regulations with what we know as quality. A strong step in the right direction could be made by eliminating some of the lowest standards that are now considered acceptable.”

The researchers said, “We should recognize that policymakers might dilute standards to avoid the political ramifications of shutting down non-responsive child care centers. However, state licensing agencies could offer incentives for meeting higher standards through increased public subsidies for personnel preparation and by delaying the time that child care providers have in meeting high standards so that they can be reasonably reached. For example: By the year 2004, we will expect directors to have advanced levels of preparation in child development administration.”

**More precise language**

Regulators should describe the practices they intend to promote. Expectations for health and safety practices were more frequently described in detail, while other quality practices – particularly those related to child development – were referred to vaguely, or not at all.

To link policy with quality practices, such as specific levels of personnel training, access to stimulating materials, and positive relationships with families, descriptive language and examples of how that expectation might be implemented are needed. Without language to describe quality practices, such practices may be assumed to be optional.

Gallagher said, “A message needs to be sent through our regulations that we expect children to have positive experiences that enhance development in child care as well as keeping children healthy and safe.”

**Encourage developmental enhancement**

One important role for professional groups and associations at the state and federal level would be to review periodically the rules and standards for child care to assure that they match current thinking in the field.

One of the eight National Goals in Education endorsed by the 50 governors and the president was that “all children should arrive at school ready to learn.” Gallagher said, “As we enter the 21st century it is clear that we are changing our view of early child care from one of a safe haven to one of developmental enhancement. We need to make sure that our regulations reflect that changed view.”

Personnel requirements (higher level of professional preparation) should be made explicit.

Gallagher and Rooney conducted the research for the National Center for Early Development & Learning based at UNC-Chapel Hill.

**If you want to know more:**

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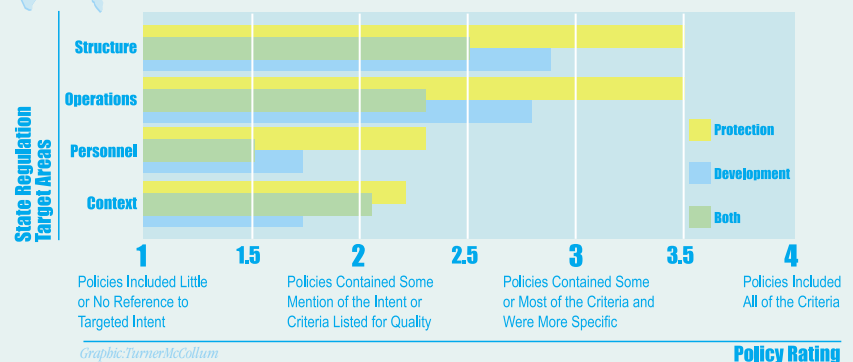
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**Content Analysis Summary of State Regulations**

(Composite Rating of four states: California, Colorado, Connecticut, North Carolina)



The above content analysis summary of state regulations is a composite rating of four states – California, Colorado, Connecticut, and North Carolina. For each target area, researchers developed separate rubrics for differential analysis of *child protection* (health and safety) and the enhancement of *child development* aspects of the policies.

**Making Transition  
Connections:  
A collaboration of  
families and schools**



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**T**he Kindergarten Transition Project at the National Center for Early Development & Learning has developed a school-based approach designed to enhance connections among children, families, teachers and peers during the transition to kindergarten.

University of Virginia Researchers **Marcia Kraft-Sayre** and **Robert Pianta** say these connections can be important supports to children and families during this period of change and reflect recent attempts to describe what "ready schools" can do to ease transitions (National Education Goals Panel, 1997).

Activities are intended to increase familiarity with school, provide for consistent expectations between home and school, and make children and families more comfortable interacting with school.

"In addition, these relationships enable kindergarten teachers to more easily, and earlier, use the resources of families to support children's competence in school," Kraft-Sayre said.

**How the program was developed**

Researchers collaborated with preschools, elementary schools, a summer pre-kindergarten program, and parents to learn about current transition practices, and then cooperatively designed a set of activities to foster positive transition experiences.

Regular meetings were held with teachers, family support workers, and principals to discuss factors that enhanced or hindered these kindergarten transition activities. In addition, families were asked about their experiences with their children's transition to kindergarten.

**Recommended activities**

"A package of activities affecting many connections – child-teacher, family-teacher, child-peer, and others – is more likely to support a successful transition, than any one activity alone. For example, children in one school system

are enrolled in preschool with peers with whom they will go to elementary school," Pianta said.

By arranging with elementary school principals and teachers for these children to be in the same kindergarten classroom together, peer relationships developed in preschool can be carried over into kindergarten.

Several preschools promote family-school connections by providing family support services. A family support worker, who is assigned to the preschool and elementary school, meets regularly with families in their homes, connects them to community resources when needed, provides opportunities for involvement in groups to discuss shared interests and address transition issues, and works to engage families in positive relationships with school.

Meetings between parents and kindergarten teachers before the onset of kindergarten, are arranged by the teacher and family support worker to help establish parent-teacher communication. The family support worker can be a bridge of continuity for families as their children transition to kindergarten and by accompanying them during visits to the elementary school when needed.

An additional connection involves linking pre-kindergarten children with their anticipated elementary school through opportunities for rising kindergarten children to visit their classroom in the spring before their kindergarten year.

Children from four-year-old classes and from special education classrooms are included, and can visit the kindergarten classroom, tour the school, participate in recess and eat lunch in the cafeteria.

Familiarizing children with their kindergarten teacher and specific classroom activities prior to school entry, in conjunction with a number of other transition activities reduces uncertainty for the child.

Finally, said Pianta, perhaps the most important activity to enhance kindergarten transitions has been collaborative group meetings where key players in the transition process – the

teachers, principals, and family workers – all work together.

These meetings allow discussion of problems and solutions and build connections among program staff. For example, preschool and kindergarten staff, with the mutually shared goal of having preschool peers together in kindergarten, are working together to achieve this goal when kindergarten placement decisions are made.

### Collaboration is fundamental

The researchers said collaboration among everyone involved is fundamental to both the development and implementation of a kindergarten transition program.

### Suggested family/school connections

- Arrange a time for parents to meet with the preschool and kindergarten teachers to discuss the expectations of kindergarten and their children's specific needs.
- Organize an informal dinner with parents and kindergarten teachers in conjunction with school open houses or back to school nights.
- Place children with kindergarten teachers who taught their older siblings to build upon pre-existing family-teacher bonds.
- Encourage families to engage their children in literacy activities at home, such as reading together.

### Suggested child/school connections

- Provide opportunities for children to interact directly with their anticipated kindergarten teachers by arranging visits to kindergarten classrooms during story time, center time, recess, or a special school function.
- Familiarize children with their kindergarten teachers by reviewing their names, showing their pictures, and discussing what the kindergarten classroom will be like.
- Orient preschool children to the expectations of kindergarten, discuss the rules for learning and behaving, such as walking in a "kindergarten line."



### Suggested peer connections

- Arrange for children to interact with future kindergarten classmates at preschool or outside the classroom setting.
- Identify a current kindergartner to serve as "buddy" to a preschooler. Plan visits to the kindergarten classroom when the kindergartner "buddy" reads a story, demonstrates how to play a game, or shows the younger child how to use the classroom computer.

### Suggested program connections

- Arrange discussions between preschool and kindergarten personnel about classroom practices and specific needs of individual children. 🌀

#### If you want to know more

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## "Popsicle night"

### promotes transition in a fun way

The following vignette exemplifies the transition activities used by NCEDL researchers in the kindergarten transition project:

During the summer prior to the start of kindergarten, a playground "popsicle night" was offered for the rising kindergartners, parents, siblings and other family members. This informal, low-key activity enabled the children and their families to experience the school in a fun and non-demanding manner.

It was held from 6:30-7:30 PM, so that parents who worked during the day could attend. Unlike a kindergarten orientation, there was no formal agenda. Elementary school personnel and the family worker joined families on the playground and answered questions.

For example, one parent asked about immunizations for school entry. The principal explained the process and offered to follow up with the family.

The turnout for this was actually better than for the more formal kindergarten orientation at one of the schools. Several of the children were initially hesitant to play and stayed close by their families, but quickly warmed up as their preschool friends arrived. Children were able to reconnect with preschool peers, and become familiar with the school playground.

Families met other families of classmates of the children, and were able to interact informally with school staff. All and all, this activity helped ease the transition to school in a relaxed and fun way.