

# News Release

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## FOR RELEASE

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### **Most California Children Attend Center-Based Preschools; Educational Quality of Programs Falls Short**

More than half of California's preschoolers attend center-based early care and education programs, but the children who have the most to gain from preschool frequently are those least likely to participate in the programs, according to a new RAND Corporation [study](#).

Researchers found that children from lower-income families, children whose mothers have less education and Latino children are significantly less likely than others to attend center-based early care and education programs, even though they are among the groups that consistently show a lack of readiness for school.

While research has demonstrated that high-quality preschool can help children prepare for kindergarten and later grades, RAND researchers found that the quality of preschools in California is mixed.

Most center-based programs meet quality benchmarks for class size and child-staff ratios. But only one in four children participates in a classroom that provides instruction that promotes thinking and language skills, key features that prepare children for kindergarten. Children from more-affluent families were no more likely to experience high quality environments -- especially those features linked to early learning -- than children from low-income families.

The findings are from the latest report in an ongoing research project intended to outline the adequacy and effectiveness of preschool education in California.

“It is now the norm for California's 3- and 4-year-olds to spend at least part of their day in a center-based early care and education program,” said [Lynn Karoly](#), the study's lead author and an economist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. “Unfortunately, relatively few of the centers we studied provide the types of high-quality early learning experiences that can help prepare children to succeed when they enter school.”

The RAND study is based upon a survey of more than 2,000 households of children eligible to enter kindergarten in the fall of 2007 or 2008. Researchers also conducted interviews with preschool teachers and administrators from more than 600 programs. In addition, researchers

visited about 250 of the center-based programs to observe the nature of the interactions and activities in the classroom and check other measures of quality such as group sizes and child-staff ratios.

The study found that an estimated 59 percent of preschool-aged children in California attend center-based early care and education programs, including two-thirds of 4-year-olds and half of 3-year-olds. Participation is linked primarily to a family's socioeconomic standing, rather than race or ethnicity, according to the study.

Just 45 percent of children whose mothers have less than a high school diploma attended center-based programs, while 80 percent of children whose mothers have graduate degrees were in such programs. The chances a child will attend a center-based early care and education program also rise with a family's income.

More than 70 percent of the center-based programs evaluated by the RAND research team met quality benchmarks for class size and child-teacher ratios, but other quality benchmarks were achieved less often.

While two-thirds of children attended a program where teachers had an associate degree, only one in four children were taught by teachers with a bachelor's degree in the early childhood field or a related discipline. In addition, just 22 percent of children were in classrooms that were rated between good and excellent for space, furnishings and activities, according researchers.

The RAND study provides details about the nature and quality of California preschool programs that has not been available previously. Among the reports other findings are:

- Among children who could benefit the most from quality preschool, no more than 15 percent are enrolled in classrooms that meet quality benchmarks for instructional supports that promote higher-order thinking and language skills.
- Among 3 and 4-year-olds who did not attend a center-based preschool program, about 25 percent were cared for by parents and 16 percent were cared for by a nonparent in a home setting.
- About 22 percent of California's preschool-aged children attend publicly funded center-based programs such as Head Start, the California State Preschool program, or a public school prekindergarten; 28 percent attend private-school prekindergartens, preschools, or nursery schools; and 9 percent participate in a child care center.
- Public preschool program such as the California State Preschool and public prekindergarten programs were more likely to meet some of the quality benchmarks than private centers. Half of the children in public programs had a teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, compared to one in eight children in private prekindergartens or child care centers.

“These findings should be useful to policymakers who are interested in improving the quality of early care and education programs in California,” Karoly said. “This study provides the best information to date on the quality shortfalls that affect all groups of preschool-age children in

California, and the missed opportunity that results from the low rates of participation among groups of children who stand the most to gain from a high-quality early learning experience.ö

The study, ö[Prepared to Learn: The Nature and Quality of Early Care and Education Experiences for Preschool-Age Children in California](#),ö is available at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org).

The report is the third from the California Preschool Study, which was requested by the California Governor's Committee on Education Excellence, the state Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Speaker of the California Assembly and the President pro Tempore of the California State Senate. Two studies released in 2007 examined gaps in school readiness and academic achievement in the early elementary grades and the system of publicly funded care and early education programs in California.

Funding for the project is provided by The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, W. K. Kellogg Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts through the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, and Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP). The project has been guided by an advisory group of academic researchers, policy experts, and practitioners.

Other authors of the RAND report are [Gail L. Zellman](#), Bonnie Ghosh-Dastidar, Michal Perlman, Lynda Fernyhough.

The [California Preschool Study](#) is conducted through [RAND Labor and Population](#), which examines issues involving U.S. labor markets, the demographics of families and children, social welfare policy, the social and economic functioning of the elderly, and economic and social change in developing countries.

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