The Military Child Care Connection

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Every day the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) uses 297,451 diapers; prepares 594,902 servings of “liquid baby rations”; issues purchase orders for cribs, strollers, and rocking chairs; and sings thousands of lullaby “cadences.” It was not always that way. The profile of the U.S. Armed Forces has changed from that of single members living in barracks, to one of a diverse volunteer workforce with growing numbers of female service members, working spouses, and sole and dual military parents. Child care has become a workforce issue vital to U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine families and to the military mission.

The military child care program is truly a Cinderella story. At one time, it was known as the “ghetto of American child care” with unsafe and unsuitable facilities, weak standards that were sporadically enforced, staff who were poorly trained and compensated with turnover rates at some centers as high as 300%, and a general lack of oversight and attention from military officials. In the past dozen years, however, military child care has achieved a remarkable turnaround. Today it is acclaimed as a model for the nation, and described as the “gold standard for child care.” Fully 50% of the children in military child care programs are under age three, and this article describes the military’s approach to providing flexible, high-quality, affordable infant and toddler child care.

An Example of Employer-Sponsored Care

Before launching the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the country, the military services looked primarily to the private sector to meet the child care needs of their personnel. Those needs are special, however. Military work schedules require early morning and irregular duty hours, field exercises, and extended periods away from home. Families move every few years and must reestablish routines and child care arrangements with every new assignment. Service members posted overseas face language problems, and often their host nations lack child care services. In some instances they are in hostile environments. Few can depend on care by relatives. Even in the United States, the hours offered by off-post, civilian child care programs are too limited to help military families counter the instability in their work lives and bridge the distance separating them from relatives. Infant and toddler child care is difficult to find and expensive, and programs seldom admit children under six months of age. Moreover, the quality of care varies greatly in the communities surrounding military

bases because child care licensing standards differ from state to state. This variability leaves military families unsure of the child care conditions they will find as they move from post to post.

In the wake of concerns over widely publicized child abuse scandals, congressional hearings culminated in the Military Child Care Act of 1989, which made far-reaching recommendations for improving the care provided by the military services. The DoD responded by creating a system of child care options, oversight to maintain standards and safety, training and improved wages for staff, accreditation to improve quality, and cost sharing to improve affordability. The comprehensive child care system that resulted now extends safe, high-quality care each day to more than 170,000 children from birth through age 12, at 300 locations around the world.

Developing a Seamless Child Care System

The children in military families are served through a delivery system that includes child development centers, networks of family child care homes operated in government housing units and off base, and programs for school-age children. Many military bases also have outreach programs that provide on-site care during special functions, sponsor playgroups, and refer families to accredited child care programs in the civilian community. This delivery system is seamless, meaning there is a single point of entry to access care. Parents find care through a resource and referral office that manages waiting lists for all the types of care and projects future demand by families anticipating a move or a new baby.

Military child care programs offer services on different schedules as well. Full-day care is provided for working and student parents; part-day care is available for those with shift work or part-time schedules; and hourly care can be used during official functions, medical appointments, while preparing to move, or while parents are volunteering on the base. Occasional care offers respite to parents under stress, at social functions, on errands, as well as at a “parent’s night out.” Extended hours, around-the-clock, and long-term care options offer critical support to parents who must leave home to meet the military mission—nearby or far away.

Assuring Quality in Military Child Care Programs

The military is serious about its obligation toward the children in its care, and careful attention is paid to managing risk and assuring quality—especially in settings that serve infants and toddlers. This includes protecting children from physical and emotional harm, preventing false child abuse allegations against staff, and minimizing exposure to disease and unsafe conditions. It also encompasses a concerted effort to raise the quality of care to meet or exceed the standards of quality endorsed by nationally recognized professional organizations.

All military child development programs must be certified by DoD each year. DoD certification is the military equivalent of state licensing, and it represents verified compliance with specific standards regarding fire, health, safety, developmental programming, child abuse prevention, funding, and staff training. Four unannounced inspections are made each year—one by a multidisciplinary team that includes an early childhood professional, and one by a child care/technical specialist(s) from military headquarters. Enforcement is done under a “fix, waive, or close” policy. When the inspections first started, it was not unusual for child care facilities and programs to be partially or completely closed—temporarily or permanently. Now, that seldom occurs. Technical staff who work on the installation, such as the fire marshal, safety officer, and health professionals, cooperate with the child care staff to achieve certification; and they share in the sense of pride when the certification process is successfully completed.
As employers, the military services share the cost of child care with parents. Care is subsidized for all parents on a sliding scale, and they pay on average about 50% of the cost of care.

Beyond compliance with health and safety standards, a key indicator of child care quality is accreditation by an outside agency. As of May 2001, more than 98% of military child development centers had been accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). In contrast, less than 10% of child care centers in the United States have attained this level of recognized quality. Increasing the availability of military child care is crucial, but that goal is not pursued at the expense of quality. Currently, the military services provide child care sufficient to meet 63% of the demand, with a goal of meeting 80% of the need within five years.

Funding Military Child Care Programs

Affordability is of concern to both parents and funding agencies—in this case the military services. The average cost to parents is $74 per week (including infant care and two vacation weeks), which is significantly less than private sector fees for comparable services.

As employers, the military services share the cost of child care with parents. Care is subsidized for all parents on a sliding scale, and they pay on average about 50% of the cost of care. Depending on family income, fees range from $40 to $114 per week—regardless of the age of the child in care. In civilian child care programs, parents often pay twice as much for infant care as for preschool or school-age care. In some services, programs are authorized to offer a multiple-child discount of up to 20%, and some also reduce fees for parents who volunteer in the child care program. An October 1999 report by the General Accounting Office found that the total cost per hour of child care (including military subsidies) is similar to costs in civilian centers of equally high quality, taking account of the number of infants and toddlers served.

Like most civilian-sector child care programs, military child care is labor-intensive, which means that staff salaries are the greatest expense in program budgets. Military child care programs have “broken the link” between staff salaries and parent fees, however, by raising compensation for those who work with children without driving up fees beyond the ability of parents to pay. Employees receive competitive salaries with benefits, and many family child care providers receive subsidies to offset the revenue they lose by charging the lower fees set by the military system. Funds from the military services budget make up the difference between revenue gained from parent fees and actual program costs.

Military Child Care Services for Infants and Toddlers

As noted earlier, one-half of the children in military child care programs are under age three, and much of the remaining unmet need is for infant and toddler care. Military child development centers provide infant care beginning at 6 weeks of age for up to 12 hours each weekday. Newborn care in centers is authorized under controlled circumstances. After the newborn stage, children are with primary caregivers using specific adult-to-child ratios for each age served, that is, infants from 6 weeks to 12 months of age, pre-toddlers from 12 to 24 months of age, and toddlers from 24 months to 3 years of age. Center fees include up to one hour of care before and after the service members’ official duty day to give parents ample time to pick up and drop off their children.

The military services have extensively renovated or constructed new center facilities to provide safe, flexible, and easily maintainable infant/toddler environments. Designs incorporate a series of classroom modules and adjacent playgrounds for different age groups, with space for administrative functions, such as a kitchen, offices, a registration area, and storage. All are accessible to the disabled and have bathrooms within each room. Military child development center designs comply with nationally recognized building codes and with the National Fire Life Safety Code or its equivalent.

Military family child care homes are allowed to care for infants beginning at four weeks of age, and some special newborn homes accept babies from birth. Most family child care homes are open 10 to 12 hours per day; many provide early morning, evening, and weekend hours to accommodate shift work and military training exercises. Designated family child care homes provide the overnight

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— Judith Applebaum, vice president, National Women’s Law Center

**Lesson 1:** Do not be daunted by the task. It is possible to take a woefully inadequate child care system and dramatically improve it.

- The military consciously built a system that links centers, family child care homes, school-age programs, and resource and referral services.

**Lesson 2:** Recognize and acknowledge the seriousness of the child care problem and the consequences of inaction for both workforce performance and child well-being.

**Lesson 3:** Improve child care quality by establishing and enforcing comprehensive standards, assisting providers to become accredited, and enhancing provider compensation and training.

- Military oversight includes four unannounced visits per year; 95% of military centers are accredited (98% as of May 2001), and the $8 per hour paid to an entry-level worker in military child care exceeds the $7.50 average wage received by all civilian child care workers.

**Lesson 4:** Keep parent fees affordable through subsidies for families who cannot pay the full cost of good child care.

- Sliding fee scales make child care accessible even to those with the lowest incomes, and military subsidies keep parent fees 25% below those paid by civilian families for equivalent care.

**Lesson 5:** Expand the availability of all kinds of care by continually assessing unmet need and taking steps to address it.

- The military currently meets 58% of the child care needs of its personnel (63% as of May 2001), and plans are in place to reach 80% coverage by 2005.

**Lesson 6:** Commit the resources necessary to get the job done; increased funding for child care will pay for itself in the stability of the workforce and the healthy development of children.

- Military services funding devoted to child care rose from about $90 million in the late 1980s, to $352 million in 2000.

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and long-term care needed by single service members and dual military couples when their units/ships/flight crews are deployed.

The military services have instituted specific practices targeted to infants and toddlers that ensure that the youngest children receive care that nurtures and promotes their development. Policies define staff-to-child ratios and maximum group sizes; prohibit infants from being confined in cribs when they are awake; and restrict bottle propping and the use of high chairs, walkers, playpens, and television. Cribs do not stand in separate crib rooms but in activity areas for maximum visibility and easy interactions. Primary caregivers are assigned to all children, and infants are allowed to follow their own sleep and feeding schedules.

Service and DoD management policies are designed to minimize the risk of accidents and abuse to infants and toddlers in its child care programs. For instance, training all staff in first aid, CPR, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) prevention. Criminal history background checks are completed for all employees, family child care providers, and their family members over age twelve. Video surveillance cameras, a policy of rotating staff caregiving responsibilities for diapering and toileting, and restrictions on “outsider” access to infants, all reduce the risk of abuse or neglect by any single individual. Staff are trained on appropriate and inappropriate touching, how to identify and report child abuse, and how to prevent the occurrence of abuse in center and family child care settings. Concerns about the health, safety, or well-being of children in child care programs can be reported on a dedicated DoD 24-hour toll-free hotline.13,16

Finally, military child care programs are offered as a supplement to the family, not a substitute for the parents’ role...
as the agents for the care and development of the child. To reduce the conflict between parental responsibilities and military mission requirements, military child care programs not only have extended operating hours, they also offer parents daily information about the child’s experiences, provide designated areas for nursing mothers, and include parents on inspection teams and advisory councils. Attention has also gone to the New Parent Support program, which offers parenting and infant care classes, parent support groups, home visits, and crisis intervention.10

A Model for National Child Care Reform

The transformation of military child care from a disgrace to a national model came about by focusing attention and resources on three cornerstones: quality, affordability, and availability—each documented in measurable outcomes. Nothing is more remarkable about the military system than the care it offers to infants and toddlers. Infant care is notoriously scarce and expensive, and it is a challenge to provide it in a way that meets professional standards of quality. Even so, the military system provides infant care that receives high marks for quality, affordability, and availability.

The National Women’s Law Center report, Be All That We Can Be: Lessons from the Military for Improving Our Nation’s Child Care System, issued in April 2000,17,18 summarizes the military’s journey to excellence by describing the earlier deficiencies in military child care and detailing the specific steps the military used to turn its system around. The report argues that the military’s experience can be applied to improve civilian child care, concluding, “If the U.S. military can do an about face and dramatically improve its child care system in a relatively short period of time, there is great hope for improving child care across the United States. The lessons learned from this example should be applied to expand access to high-quality, affordable child care for everyone.” (See Box 1.) If this happens, the Cinderella story of military child care will come true for all of America’s infants and children. No longer will it be accurate to say that “The best chance a family has to be guaranteed affordable and high-quality (child) care in this country is to join the military.”

ENDNOTES