



Research Brief

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Child Care for Families Raising Children with Disabilities: The Role of Federal Policy in Equitable Access

The number of families raising a child with a disability has grown in recent decadesⁱ. This increase has resulted in concerns about growth in the childhood Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program, a federal program intended to financially support low-income families raising a child with a disability.

Child Care for Children with Disabilities and the Use of SSI Benefits

Access to child care can increase family financial stability by enabling parents to work, and in turn may reduce the rate at which families rely on Social Security SSI benefits to support a child with a disability. In addition, quality child care may have developmental benefits for children, which is particularly important for children with disabilitiesⁱⁱ. Families raising children with disabilities face challenges balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities. Parents often have a difficult time finding child care for a host of reasons, including a limited supply of caregivers, overt and subtle discrimination, high costs, and

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ⁱBoyle, Coleen A., et al. "Trends in the prevalence of developmental disabilities in US children, 1997–2008." *Pediatrics* 127, no. 6 (2011): 1034-1042; Halfon, Neal, Amy Houtrow, Kandyce Larson, and Paul W. Newacheck. "The changing landscape of disability in childhood." *The Future of Children* (2012): 13-42.

ⁱⁱOdom, Samuel L., Virginia Buysse, and Elena Soukakou. "Inclusion for young children with disabilities: A quarter century of research perspectives." *Journal of Early Intervention* 33, no. 4 (2011): 344-356.

difficulty integrating disability services into standard care ⁱⁱⁱ. This suggests that these families may not have access to needed child care, despite federal policies intended to support access and affordability for children with disabilities. A lack of child care exacerbates economic vulnerability by limiting parents' ability to work, and ultimately reducing financial resources available in the household. Mothers of children with disabilities are less likely to work than mothers of typically developing children and, if they are employed, they are more likely to work part-time ^{iv}.

Considering the importance of child care for parental employment and child development, this study looks at the child care arrangements for children with disabilities—indirectly shedding light on the role of child care policies in supporting parental employment.

Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), this study compares maternal employment at kindergarten enrollment for parents with a child who has a disability relative to other parents. If current policies are not supporting access to early care and education for children with disabilities, we

would expect to see a larger effect of kindergarten enrollment on employment for mothers who have a child with a disability—that is, these mothers stay home and out of the workforce until their child enrolls in kindergarten at higher rates than other mothers. We also examine the use of child care subsidy programs by parents.

Federal Policies Related to Child Care Services

- ◇ Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Subsidies:
 - States may prioritize children with special needs
- ◇ Head Start:
 - Required to set aside 10% of slots for children with disabilities
- ◇ Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA):
 - Mandates inclusion for children with disabilities in all settings, including early child care and education
 - Provides funding for the portion of the day that a child is receiving Individualized Education Program (IEP) services at a child care or early childhood education provider
- ◇ Interaction with SSI
 - Receipt of SSI qualifies a child for enrollment in Head Start
 - CCDF subsidies excluded from countable income

Children with Disabilities Receive Care at Higher Rates

We find that preschoolers with disabilities are more likely than their peers to receive regular non-parental care. These children are also more likely to be enrolled in part-time and center-based care. Moreover, parents' annual cost and hourly cost for care is significantly lower for

ⁱⁱⁱWeglarz-Ward, Jenna M., and Rosa Milagros Santos. "Parent and Professional Perceptions of Inclusion in Childcare." *Infants & Young Children* 31, no. 2 (2018): 128-143.

^{iv}DeRigne, LeaAnne, and Shirley Porterfield. "Employment change and the role of the medical home for married and single-mother families with children with special health care needs." *Social Science & Medicine* 70, no. 4 (2010): 631-641.

children with disabilities than it is for other children, perhaps due to higher rates of receiving subsidies (see Figure 1). These families and their children appear to be more connected to services. For example, a child with a formal Individual Educational Plan (IEP) is more likely to receive center-based care and part-time care than no care or home care.

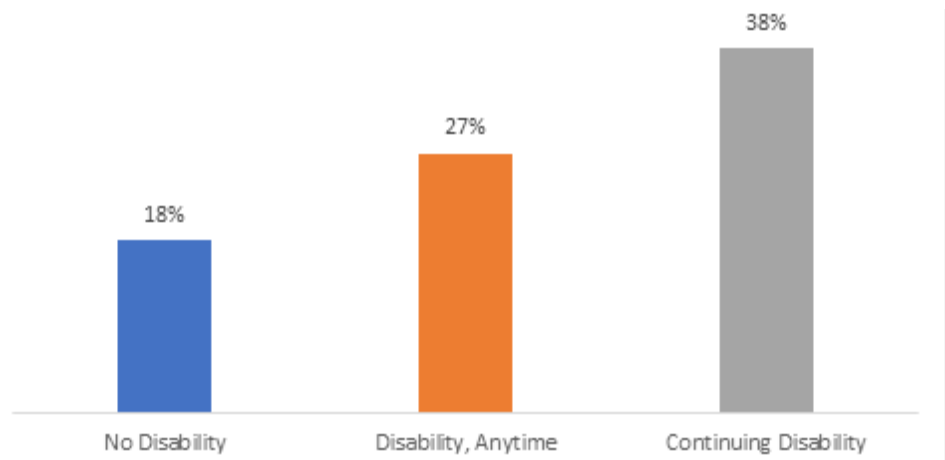


Figure 1: Children with a Disability Are More Likely to Receive a Child Care Subsidy at Age 4

Child Care for Children with Disabilities and Mother's Employment

All parents increase their work hours when children enter kindergarten, and parents of children with disabilities increase employment at the same rate as other parents. Using a larger sample size based on imputed data, this study finds that parents of children with disabilities increase their rate of employment at lower rates at kindergarten enrollment compared to other children. This may suggest that parents are not being prevented by a lack of child care in preschool ages from working. It should be noted that these patterns for child care and change in employment differ by the child's specific disability diagnosis. For example, parental employment rates for children with autism increase at a higher rate, as compared to children with other disabilities. There is a wide degree of variation in child disability and parental work responses.

Policy Implications:

- ◇ It does not seem that children with disabilities are underserved by child care programs.
- ◇ The current landscape of child care policy may be adequately supporting parental employment for parents of children with disabilities.
- ◇ Given the large numbers of children in early care, appropriate training for providers may increase the quality of services for children with disabilities.