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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Better Kid Care Program Improves the Quality of Child Care: Results from an Interview Study

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Abstract: More high quality child care is needed in the United States. This article evaluates the Better Kid Care (BKC) program produced by Pennsylvania State University Extension. Child care staff in Wisconsin were interviewed about changes they had made in their early childhood programs following participation in the BKC program. Findings show that 2 months post-program, most participants could name specific skills or knowledge they learned and improvements they made in their early childhood programs as a result of BKC. The BKC program improves child care quality, and increasing program participation is recommended.

Introduction and Background

Child care has become a normal, expectable part of early childhood for most American children. The quality of child care has a big impact on young children. At its best, early care and education (ECE) can have positive, life changing effects on young children's futures. For instance, infants with less sensitive mothers are more likely to develop secure attachments if they experience high quality child care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997). High-quality early child care also promotes cognitive and language development in young children (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000a, 2003).

The problem is that we do not have enough high-quality child care in the United States. Estimates of child care quality based on observational data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care indicate that about 61% of children in the United States receive mediocre to poor care, while 39% receive good to excellent care

(NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000b). Given the connection between child care quality and child development, an urgent need exists to improve the quality of child care nationwide.

One of the key factors in predicting the quality of child care, in the NICHD and many other studies, has been the beliefs and behaviors of child care staff (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2000b). A direct method to raise the quality of early care and education, therefore, is to provide educational programs for staff that target beliefs and behaviors.

The Better Kid Care Program

Cooperative Extension Services across the country have responded by developing training and support for early childhood educators (Hardison & Behnke, 2007; Walker, 2003). Since 1995, the Better Kid Care (BKC) program produced by Pennsylvania State University Extension has provided a series of video-based professional development workshops that educate early care providers about child development and ways to support optimal child development. Workshop content focuses on such areas as classroom environment and curriculum, child behavior management, communication with parents, and children's health and safety. Each year one workshop addresses the needs of center directors and has included such topics as "Implementing, Supporting and Using Good Child Observation" and "Recruiting, Hiring, and Training Staff." The BKC workshops can be downlinked free to county Extension offices across the United States via satellite relay. In some places the programs are viewed live, while in other places they are viewed on videotape. Between five and seven workshops are offered each year.

The BKC workshops combine the viewing of the program with the opportunity to discuss the topic within each local group. Meetings are usually on weekday evenings, right after work. Each workshop lasts 2 hours, including broadcast time, discussion, and activities. In many states, the programs qualify as required inservice hours for early childhood teachers. Between 40 and 45 states use BKC each year to provide training for early childhood staff (J. E. Van Horn, personal communication, December 21, 2009). Wisconsin is one of those states, offering the Penn State BKC program in over 40% of Wisconsin counties five times each year. Since 1999, 56 BKC workshops have been offered in Wisconsin.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the University of Wisconsin-Extension study reported here was to find out whether the BKC program, developed at Penn State, has been having its intended effect in the state of Wisconsin: to improve the quality of child care. The primary questions addressed in this evaluation were:

1. How many early childhood professionals in Wisconsin (the test state) are reached with the Better Kid Care program in a typical year?
2. Did staff who participated in the study improve their programs in response to the Better Kid Care workshops?

Methodology and Sample

To answer the first question (about numbers of participants reached), Wisconsin county Extension offices were surveyed twice via email questionnaire in 2005-06 and again in 2008-09.

To answer the second question (about impacts of the program), 11 county Extension offices conducted telephone interviews with selected participants, including six center directors, 14 center teachers, and 19 family child care providers (n=39). In experience, participants ranged from staff in their first year on the job to those with 30 years. They worked with children ranging from infants to school-agers. The interviews were conducted by telephone 2 months following the final BKC program of the year, and responses to the following three interview questions were recorded verbatim.

1. Thinking about the Better Kid Care programs you attended, was there anything you learned that stuck in your mind? It might be something unexpected, or useful, or even something you disagreed with.

2. Can you think of anything you have done differently in your work, because of the Better Kid Care program?

3. Do you have any advice for us on how to make these programs more useful?

Using open-ended interview questions requires respondents to create answers from their own memories and thinking, rather than recognizing a correct answer in a questionnaire list. "Production measures" of this kind (in contrast to "recognition measures") are thought by some researchers to have greater validity (Gavaghan, Arnold, & Gibbs, 1983). Production responses also tend to be highly specific (describing actual actions), which is known to produce more accurate data (Converse & Presser, 1986). The study reported here had prior approval from the Institutional Review Board of University of Wisconsin-Extension.

Results

Numbers Reached Per Year

In the first period studied (2005-06), half of Wisconsin's 72 counties participated in the BKC project (n=36), and half of those (n=18) provided data on participation in specific programs (Table 1). More staff participated in the fall than in the spring (by about 100 per session). The session that focused just on the Directors' role had a low turnout. Because the data came from just half of the participating counties, it is estimated that there were more than 1,800 teaching contacts statewide that year.

Table 1.
Workshop Participation During 2005-2006 (in 18 Counties)

Air Date	Title	Number of Participants
Oct 6, 2005	How to Work with Active Children	271
Dec 1, 2005	Avoid Behavior Problems	257
Mar 23, 2006	Hot Topics for Directors	51
Apr 6, 2006	Parents: Friends or Foes?	180
May 11, 2006	How to Get Parents on Your Team	165

	Total Teaching Contacts:	924
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The second period studied was the 2008-09 program year. During that year 30 counties (42%) participated in the BKC Program, with approximately 1,300 child care staff attending the workshops. Most participants (80%) received state-approved continuing education credits.

Based on the findings from these two periods, the program teaches between 1,000 and 2,000 child care staff in Wisconsin per year. Across the 10 years of the project, an estimated 1,600 2-hour training sessions were held, with about 15,000 participants overall. These numbers have surprised people in both Extension and the child care professional community. They suggest that in Wisconsin, Extension has quietly become one of the primary sources of continuing education for the child care profession.

Did the Program Make a Difference?

The recorded responses to the interview questions were categorized by content and compared to the actual content of the BKC programs in the prior 2 years. Most participants (79%) described specific, useful knowledge or skills they had learned from the BKC programs. Fully 85% of respondents also described specific improvements they had made in their early care and education programs as a result of the BKC programs. The improvements they described were highly consistent with the advice provided in the actual BKC programs offered in the previous 2 years.

The following is a sample of participant responses arranged by the four topic areas covered during the 2005-2006 year: Communication with Parents, Child Guidance, Room Layout, and Emergency Preparedness.

Communication with Parents

The final two BKC programs of the year both addressed the programs' relationships with parents. Communication with parents was the most frequently offered example of knowledge gains and program improvements. Nearly one-third of respondents (31%) described specific changes they had made in their programs in how they communicated with parents.

We developed "personality workbooks" for each child where the provider writes daily notes and shares information about what the child did, learned, said, etc., and then the parents take the books home on weekends and can add information. The journals are kept from September to September with each child and then the parents get to keep the journal.
--Family Child Care Provider--

Now I send out yearly contracts with updates, which I never did before. I'm keeping projects and tracking individual children's activities to share with parents. --Family Child Care Provider--

I learned to share tid bits of something that happened each day with each parent. No matter how bad the day went, there has got to be something good that you can say to the parent. I started taking more pictures and trying to give them out to parents and write descriptions on them, so that they can see more of what's going on during the day. Just trying to share with them more stuff. Trying to communicate better. --Center Teacher--

Child Guidance

In one-quarter of the interviews (26%), the respondent reported making specific changes in how they handled child guidance and discipline issues. Staff reported learning different things from these BKC programs in the fall of 2005, which were over a half-year prior to the interview.

Some said they had learned about child guidance and the importance of reinforcing positive behaviors in young children.

I learned to compliment a child when he/she does something right, rather than just scolding when a child does something wrong. --Center Lead Teacher--

I can think of 3 things I do differently. First, I made my groups smaller to give more one-on-one time. Second, I try to focus more on the children behaving appropriately and less time on those acting out. And third, I really try to find and bring easier projects for the children. --Center Director--

Four and five-year-old boys are so active. The program on "How to work with Active Children" helped me understand how to use their energy. We have the children help with clean-up now. When they help to care for the facility they seem to appreciate it more. --Center Teacher--

Others talked about how they had learned to make transitions smoother.

I learned from the program on circle time and ways to transition. For circle time, I use a story, calendar, and a clean-up song to transition to the next thing. --Family Child Care Provider--

OK, in like 5 minutes, I let them know we are doing this, I bring it up so they know they are going from one part of the day to the next, and it is going smoother now. --Family Child Care Provider--

Two teachers responded that the BKC programs had changed their approach to their own emotions during teacher-child conflicts, and they were now much better at keeping the situation calm.

My day-to-day approach to children is different. I am more guarded when something happens. I am more calm about situations where before I might have gotten more excited. --Family Child Care Provider--

Room Layout

About 13% of the interviewed staff reported specific changes they had made to their room layouts, based on ideas learned from the BKC program. These ideas came from workshops in the fall of 2005, over a half-year prior to the interview.

I've set up different areas for the kids to play or be by themselves. I've made a "quiet area" for the kids. --Family Child Care Provider--

I made a soft area and used shelves to make another area to break up the large space. This reduced running and kids knocking over each other's blocks. --Center Lead Teacher--

Emergency Preparedness

The BKC program on Hot Topics for Directors had the fewest participants, only 51 statewide, but 8% of respondents described knowledge gain or actual changes they had made to their programs as a result of this session. In all three cases, being prepared for emergencies was the "hot topic."

We put together the emergency supplies suggested in the program and combined them with our first aid kit. We bought a large plastic tote and we store it in the basement where we would head in a storm emergency. --Family Child Care Provider--

How Could These Programs Be Made More Useful?

When respondents were asked for advice on improving the BKC sessions, the most common response was that they are great just as is. Participants liked the way these workshops are organized. In particular, respondents were very happy with the amount of discussion and sharing with other, local early childhood professionals. Positive comments included the following.

'Better Kid Care' programs are more interactive and therefore more useful than the technical school programs. --Lead Teacher--

I liked mixing and talking with other centers and sharing ideas and opinions. Other teachers have really good ideas and I enjoyed talking to the ones who had more experience. --Center Teacher--

I come home with new ideas every time I attend. The group discussion often leads to some great problem solving. --Family Child Care Provider--

Participants also liked that the videotapes show real people in real situations, the variety of topics covered, as well as the organization of sessions.

The programs show real teachers offering suggestions on working with kids. --Family Child Care Provider--

They offer topics I can't find anywhere else. --Child Care Provider--

We borrow the tapes from the Extension Office and use them for our monthly staff training. The tapes are used as a stepping stone to topics to discuss. --Center Director--

However, some useful suggestions were made for improving the BKC program. No one suggestion predominated. Ideas included:

- More time to talk as a group.
- If others wouldn't talk during the program.
- The program should feature younger providers and providers from a wider variety of races and cultures.

- Invite parents to attend with the early childhood staff.
- Get men staff to attend more.
- Why not hold these every month?

Summary of Findings

- Finding 1: Two months following the final program of the year, most participants (79%) described specific, useful skills or knowledge they had learned from the BKC programs.
- Finding 2: Most participants (85%) also described specific improvements they had made in their early childhood programs, as a result of the BKC programs. These improvements were linked to the advice in the specific BKC programs offered during the previous 2 years.
- Finding 3: The most useful aspect of the programs, according to participants, is the discussion and sharing with other childcare staff from the local community that follows each video-taped program.

Discussion and Implications

The BKC program, which is used in 40 to 45 states across the nation, makes efficient use of a high-quality training curriculum produced by Extension in Pennsylvania. This professional development program for early child care providers exemplifies the cost-reducing efficiencies of Extension's county-state-national partnership. Program sites within a state incur few expenses in providing these workshops to all interested child care providers and center directors.

The findings suggest that the BKC program leads to actual improvements in the quality of early care and education programs. Two months after the program ended for the year, child care staff in Wisconsin were able to name specific things they had learned from workshops (in some cases workshops that had occurred 6 months earlier) and concrete changes they had made to their programs as a result of participation. By the time the interviews were conducted, providers were already seeing the positive impact of changes they had made in response to the program, suggesting that these quality improvements may become long lasting. The discussions following the formal workshop presentations also appear to help develop social networks among providers that may foster idea exchanges and program improvements over time.

An important limitation is that interviewed staff members were not randomly selected. Instead, they were selected because they attended several BKC programs and/or seemed especially engaged as learners. For this reason, their responses may represent exemplary impacts, not average impacts of the program.

About 1,500 child care staff, in nearly half of Wisconsin counties, receive these training programs annually. According to program developer Jim Van Horn, as many as 100,000 tune in live to the program each year, without taking into account those who view the recorded version (personal communication, December 21, 2009). Continued dissemination of this program is recommended. Effort should be made to increase awareness of this program through Extension services at the national, state and local levels. Information about the program is available at <http://betterkidcare.psu.edu/>.

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