



Kern County Child Care Needs Assessment 2008



Early Childhood Council
of Kern

Planning for quality early care and education.



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Executive Summary

Every five years the Early Childhood Council of Kern, serving as the Local Child Care and Development Planning Council, is required to conduct a county-wide, child care needs assessment. This report provides an overview of the early childhood field and supervised after school programs, including the availability of services and estimates of the need for these services in Kern County.

The child care/child development needs of families vary greatly - from those who are in need of full time care in order to work or go to school, to those who are seeking limited hour programs that focus specifically on kindergarten readiness and families in need of after school programs for their school age children. Over the years, the field of early childhood has attempted to address these varied needs and as a result has created an industry with multiple categories that is difficult to report on in a standardized manner. In past reports, the number of spaces in early childhood programs has been reported by combining all types of care (full day, part day, center based, family child care, etc.). The format for this report has been modified in an effort to produce a clearer picture of the type and quantity of early childhood programs in Kern County.

As of 2007, it was estimated that there are 231,594 children ages 0-17 residing in Kern County, with a total of 14,747 live births in 2006. Many of these Kern County families face child care challenges on a daily basis: the high cost of care (particularly for infants), limited transportation, lack of spaces for children under 2 years of age, and care for school-age children before and after school and during school breaks. In addition, at the time of this report, the State of California is experiencing unprecedented fiscal shortfalls. Unemployment is on the rise, agencies are faced with cutting back services, and families are being forced to make hard choices. Child care is often one of the first sacrifices made by families in times of fiscal hardship; yet the availability of affordable, quality care is crucial to parents looking for work.

What is Kern's supply of child care?

As of October 2008 there were approximately:

- 8,589 spaces in programs that offer full day, full year services
- 3,576 spaces in programs that offer half day, part year services

These numbers include both programs that are operated with parent fees as well as those programs that are State or federally funded to provide services to families of low income. Additionally there are:

- 10,026 spaces in licensed family child care homes
- 16,805 spaces in before/after school programs
- 394 spaces designated specifically for children with special needs
- approximately 8,594 children of low income families being served through "voucher" programs.

Approximately 2,000 children participating in a "school readiness" only program.

Where does the shortage remain?

Although the need for high quality early childhood programs is still present throughout Kern County, some areas are experiencing a higher shortage than others. For example:

- Estimates indicate that the demand for care for children ages 3 to 5 years is close to being met in many communities, whereas care for infants and toddlers is still in very low supply throughout the county.
- Of all Kern communities, Frazier Park and its surrounding areas have the lowest service levels for all ages of children.

- Tehachapi, the Kern River Valley and Bakersfield are among those communities with the lowest service levels for infants and toddlers.
- In Taft, parents who can afford to pay for child care cannot find it due to a severe shortage of non-subsidized care.
- There remains an overall need for child care assistance for families who are low to moderate income.
- Child care for specific populations such as those who are homeless, grandparents raising grandchildren, and teen parents continues to be in short supply.

A 2003 Brion study estimated that approximately 20,000 new child care spaces would be needed throughout Kern County by the year 2015 in order to close the child care supply and demand gap. Although Kern County's growth rate has slowed, it is anticipated that the need for new programs will be continual to meet current and future demand. The reader of this report should note that although some data may indicate that there is sufficient care in many communities, there are multiple variables that must be taken into consideration. Is the care offered during the hours/days that are needed? Is it of the quality that families are looking for? And most importantly, is the care affordable? The latter is the primary barrier for most families in need of care.

Heading into the future

A primary responsibility of the Council is to monitor the "trends" in the early childhood field. Until very recently, there was a heavy focus on increasing the capacity of spaces in both family child care homes and child development centers throughout Kern County. Given the current fiscal crisis that California and the nation are experiencing, the Council is undergoing a shift in its focus; therefore, capacity building efforts will be targeted to individual communities and segments of the population as the need is identified. Although the need for increased child care spaces may have slowed temporarily, the need to enhance the quality of existing early childhood programs is continual. The Council will now turn its emphasis to the ongoing training and recruitment of high quality early childhood staff who will meet the needs of our changing communities. Additionally, the Council will work with programs throughout Kern County to preserve existing programs in order to avert a decrease in available options for parents during these difficult economic times.

Child care is a critical component of a community's infrastructure. Studies find that consistent, high quality early childhood services for families allows parents to work or go to school; increases job productivity; helps to prepare children for school and life success; helps to link families with needed services; and creates the opportunity for early detection of special needs, and thus reduces future costs to the education system. The Council will continue to identify new avenues and actively seek out partnerships in order to effectively address issues throughout the County. These efforts will include supporting measures to improve the state licensing and monitoring process, advocating for increased child care assistance for low to moderate income families, identifying facilities for new or expanded programs, and enhancement of the quality of new and existing early childhood programs.

The Early Childhood Council of Kern welcomes the involvement of all in the community with a desire to improve the early childhood field in our county. The public is invited to attend and actively participate with monthly meetings to address current issues. Please contact the Council office or visit our web site for meeting details.