



Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Why Early Matters

Setting the foundation for lifelong health and well-being

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Find us:



When it comes to development, it's not just *what* happens that matters, **but *when***

- Exposures and experiences prenatally and during the early years can have **powerful effects on development and lifelong health**
- During this period, developing biological systems are **most sensitive to environmental influences**
- Early care and education settings are a **primary environment shaping those exposures and experiences** – especially for children in care and education from infancy

Brain Architecture



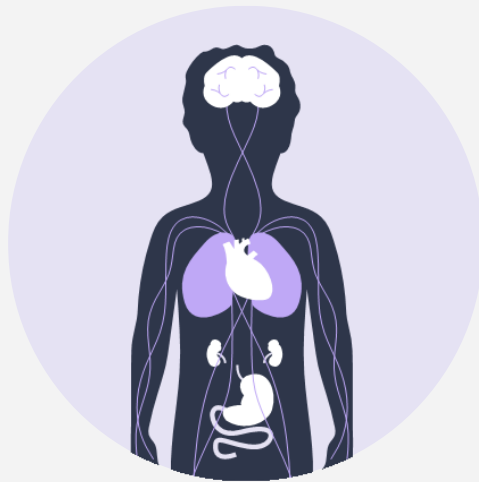
- **Brains are built over time, from the bottom up**, through an ongoing process that begins before birth
- The connections that form early provide either **a strong or weak foundation for the connections that form later**
- Early brain development **affects future learning, behavior, and health**
- Early care and education settings **play a central role in providing the experiences** that build this architecture

Serve & Return



- Serve and return interactions are **responsive exchanges between a young child and a caring adult**
- **Support the development of early language and social skills** that serve as a foundation for more complex cognitive abilities that form later in life
- ECE is a primary setting where serve-and-return interactions either happen or don't, making **educator preparation and support central to quality**

Lifelong Health & Well-Being



- Experiences and exposures during the earliest years **affect the development of many interconnected biological systems**
- Not only the brain, but also the **immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems**
- This has implications for **lifelong health**
- The stress-buffering function of high-quality ECE is likely to extend to immune, metabolic, and cardiovascular systems

Timing Matters



- The sensitivity of developing biological systems to exposures and experiences **is greatest prenatally and in the earliest years** – and decreases over time
- That means everything from temperature to toxins to relationships has its most powerful impact during these windows
- The period of greatest developmental sensitivity and the period of early care and education **are largely the same window**

Early childhood offers a **critical window of opportunity**

- A child's biological systems **adapt based on experiences in their environment**
- Many of the most prevalent diseases of adulthood **are rooted in early experiences and exposures**
- For example, when children experience significant adversity, their stress response systems can become set on permanent high alert
- Early care and education settings are a **primary lever for protecting and supporting children** during this window

Developmental Environments



- Through their exposures and experiences, **a child's environment directly shapes their development**
- These exposures and experiences can have both positive and negative influences on lifelong health
- The ECE setting is a **central and influential** developmental environment

What Surrounds Us Shapes Us

In early care and education, what surrounds the child are the educators and caregivers.

The conditions that support or deplete them shape the developmental environment the child inhabits.



Support Caregivers at Home and in ECE



- Policies that assist family caregivers – paid leave, financial supports – **reduce stress and promote stable relationships** in the critical months after birth
- The same logic applies to early childhood educators: **their stress, working conditions, and financial security directly affect the quality of interactions they can provide**

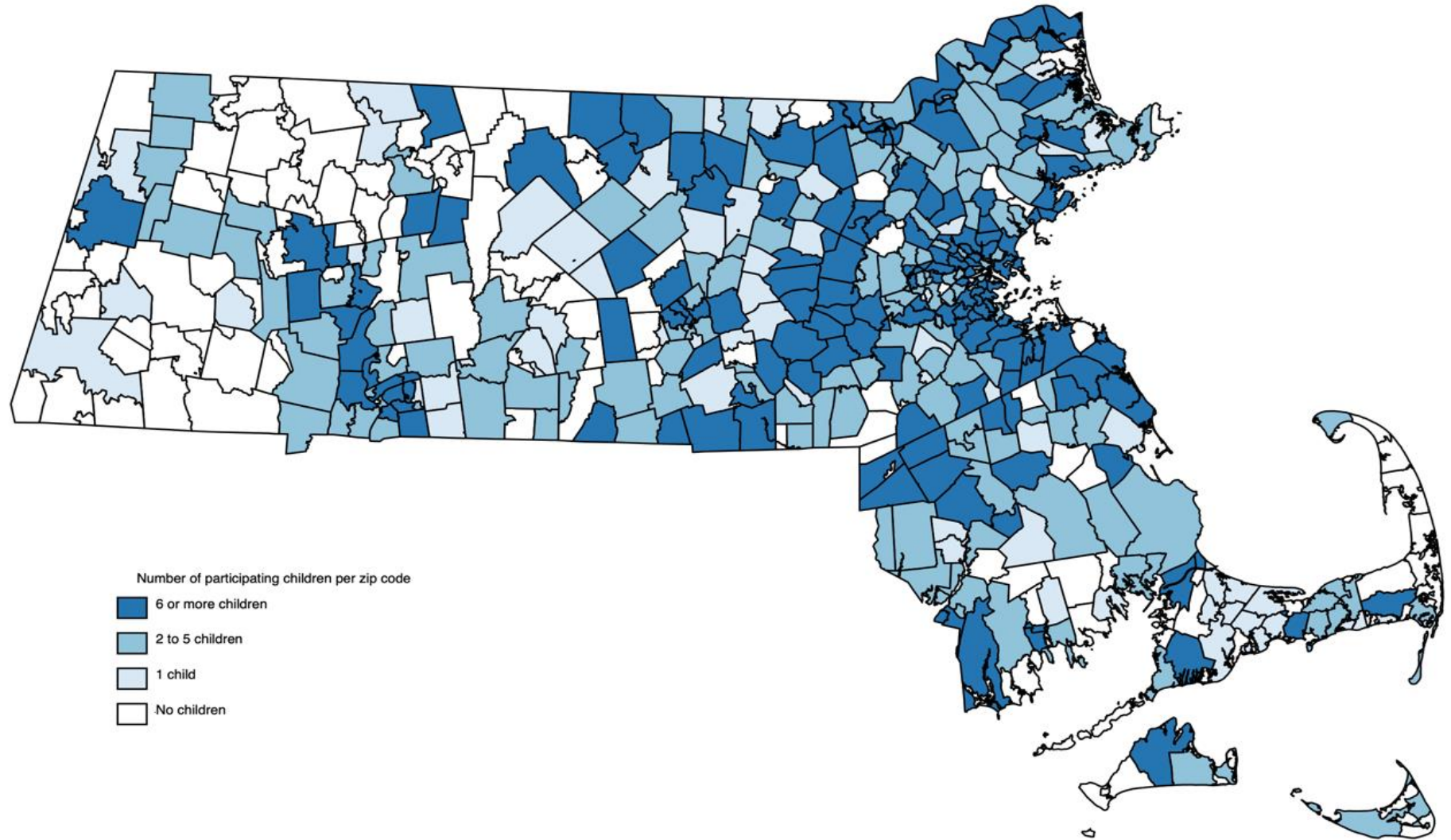
From Science to Setting: Implications for Quality in ECE

Early Learning Study @ Harvard

Goal: To capture early learning – the children and the setting types – across a single state.

Approach: Methodology from public health, used to generate a representative cohort of **young children** and their ECE **settings**.

Result: Large-scale, longitudinal study, spanning 10 years, capturing *all* learning experiences in early childhood and through elementary school.

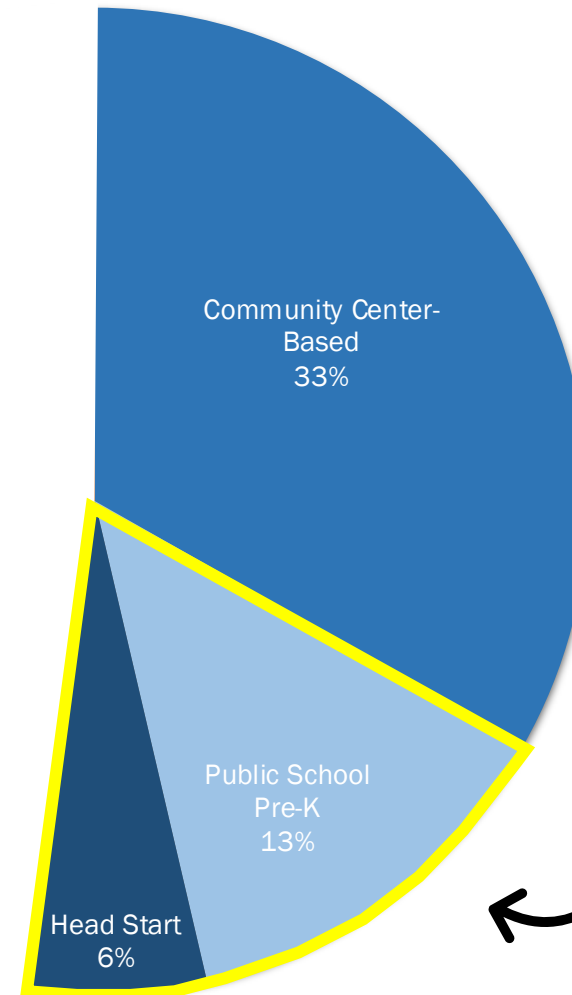


Insight 1

Families Rely on and Engage with Diverse ECE Setting Types

Some children are
cared for by their
parents only.

...And informal
ones, too.



Children are in
formal settings...

Most ECE research has
focused on these
settings

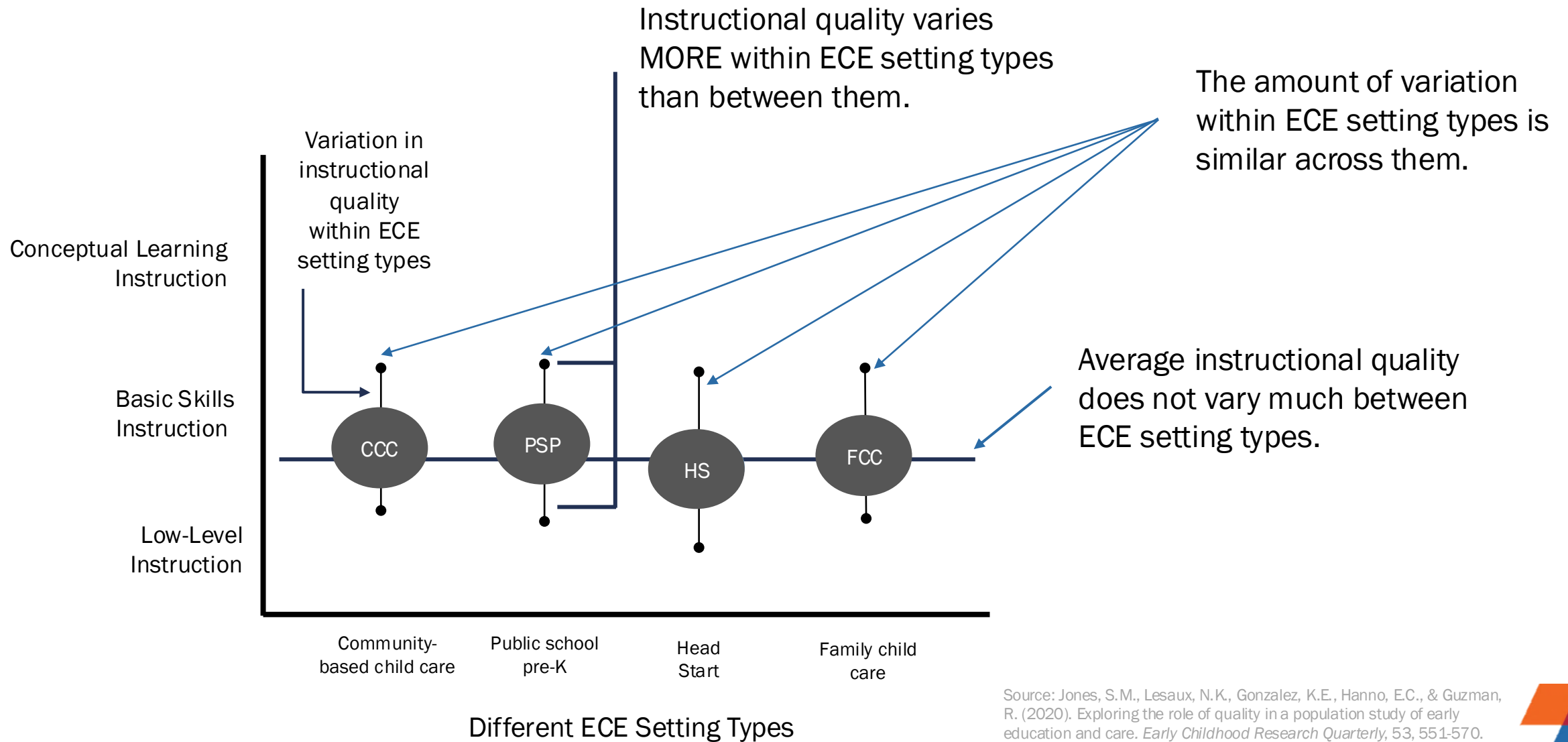
Sources: Jones, S.M., Lesaux, N.K., Gonzalez, K.E., Hanno, E.C., & Guzman, R. (2020). Exploring the role of quality in a population study of early education and care. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 53, 551-570.

Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative. (2023). *Cambridge Early Childhood Pulse Survey Briefs*.



Insight 2

Quality Varies but ECE Setting Type is Not the Key Differentiator



Insight 3

Traditional approaches to quality are not sufficient for child outcomes
(the impact lies in the interactions + experiences)

Foundational and
organizing as a platform
for quality improvement



Key ingredients for improving child outcomes

Setting-Level Interactions & Experiences

- Adult-child and child-child talk
- Educator tone
- Strategies/routines that support child engagement, attention, self-regulation, etc.



Three Big-Picture Insights

1

Families rely on and engage with diverse ECE setting types, across the mixed-delivery system

2

Quality varies across the mixed-delivery system, but ECE setting type *is not* the key differentiator of quality

3

Traditional approaches to quality are important for system design but are not sufficient to improve child outcomes

Needed systems-building work + investments

- Strengthening and expanding the mixed-delivery system + improving family access to *all* setting types
- Enacting workforce strategies and supports
 - Pipeline development; conditions to promote retention, drive improved practice, mitigate burnout, etc.
- Developing new financing strategies + approaches to capturing cost
- Data use + systems to inform continuous improvement and regular evaluation work



Thank you

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