

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-463](#), a report to the Chairwoman, Committee on Education and the Workforce, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of children age 5 and under participate each year in federally funded preschool and other early learning programs, or receive federally supported child care. Federal support for early learning and child care has evolved over time to meet emerging needs. In 2012, GAO reported that multiple federal agencies administer numerous early learning and child care programs. GAO was asked to re-examine federal programs that provide or support early learning and child care.

This report examines 1) the federal investment in early learning and child care programs; 2) fragmentation, overlap, and duplication among early learning and child care programs and agencies' efforts to address these conditions; and 3) the extent to which agencies assess performance for programs with an explicit early learning or child care purpose. GAO analyzed responses to questionnaires from nine agencies and one regional commission; reviewed budget and tax expenditure documentation, evaluations, annual program performance results, and other agency documentation; and interviewed officials from HHS, Education, and Interior.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes no recommendations in this report. In its comments, HHS agreed with GAO's findings and noted that children benefit most from investments in federal early learning and child care programs when they are coordinated with similar programs. Education and HHS also provided technical comments, which GAO incorporated as appropriate.

View [GAO-17-463](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov.

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EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE

Agencies Have Helped Address Fragmentation and Overlap through Improved Coordination

What GAO Found

Multiple federal programs may provide or support early learning or child care for children age 5 and under. Of these programs, nine describe early learning or child care as an explicit purpose and are administered by the Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS), Education (Education), and the Interior (Interior). Fiscal year 2015 obligations for these nine programs totaled approximately \$15 billion, with the vast majority of these funds concentrated in Head Start and the Child Care and Development Fund. An additional 35 programs did not have an explicit early learning or child care purpose, but permitted funds to be used for these services. Additionally, three tax expenditures subsidized individuals' private purchase of child or dependent care.

As GAO found in 2012, some early learning and child care programs are fragmented, overlap, or have potential for duplication. Specifically:

- **Fragmentation.** The federal investment in early learning and child care is fragmented in that it is administered through multiple agencies.
- **Overlap.** Some programs with an explicit early learning or child care purpose overlap, given that they target similar beneficiaries, such as low-income children, or engage in similar activities. However, these programs often have different goals and administrative structures.
- **Duplication.** Some programs are potentially duplicative because they may fund similar types of services for similar populations. However, the extent to which actual duplication exists is difficult to assess due to differing program eligibility requirements and data limitations.

HHS and Education have helped address these conditions through improved agency coordination, particularly by following leading practices for interagency collaboration. For example, in response to needed actions GAO identified in 2012, HHS and Education expanded membership of their inter-departmental workgroup on young children to include other agencies with early learning and child care programs. The agencies have also documented their agreements, dedicated staff time to promote the goals and activities of this inter-departmental workgroup, and issued joint policy statements. The resulting improvement in coordination has helped mitigate the effects of fragmentation and overlap.

HHS, Education, and Interior use different methods to assess performance for the nine programs with an explicit early learning or child care purpose. These agencies collect performance information through various combinations of performance monitoring, program evaluations or studies, and other information, such as grantee-submitted reports. In addition, they collect performance information that aligns with program objectives, and many programs examine common aspects of performance. However, the specific results agencies assess differ for a number of reasons. For example, some programs assess children only while they receive services, while others assess later impacts on children.