



February 2023

# MILITARY CHILD CARE

## DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105518](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

DOD operates the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the U.S., which it views as essential to overall mission readiness, retention, and recruitment for the military. The DOD child care program aims to provide quality, available, and affordable care for military families, and includes on-base options, as well as fee assistance for families who use community-based child care.

A report accompanying Senate bill 1790, which was amended and enacted as the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, includes a provision for GAO to examine the DOD child care program.

This report describes (1) how DOD child care supports the learning and development of young children, and how DOD seeks to ensure its quality; and (2) how the DOD child care program supports the readiness of service members and their families.

GAO searched for research on the effects of DOD's child care program on children and service members, and for general research to describe the effects of high-quality child care on children and employer-provided child care on employees. GAO reviewed DOD child care program administrative data for fiscal year 2021 (the most recent available) and pre-COVID-19 data from DOD surveys of service members (in 2018) and their spouses (in 2019), because of the disruptions COVID-19 caused to the child care industry. GAO also reviewed agency documentation and interviewed agency officials, representatives from military family associations, and other stakeholders.

View [GAO-23-105518](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

February 2023

## MILITARY CHILD CARE

### DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families

## What GAO Found

Little research exists detailing the effects of the Department of Defense (DOD) child care program on young children's learning and development outcomes. Broader child care research, however, suggests that quality child care is tied to positive outcomes for children, including improved cognitive, social, and language development. DOD has taken steps to create and maintain quality care, including by establishing programmatic and oversight requirements and developing new staff training. For example, while optional for most civilian centers, DOD requires its child development centers, school-age programs, and most community-based providers receiving DOD-subsidized fee assistance, to be nationally accredited. DOD has also recently implemented a new child care curriculum and research-informed online training program for staff at its child development centers.

#### Children Playing at a Child Care Facility



Source: stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-105518

Consistent with some research showing that employer-sponsored child care is associated with improved outcomes for workers, the DOD child care program aims to promote service member and family readiness by supporting job performance, improving retention, decreasing absenteeism, and promoting families' financial well-being. For example, DOD officials said its child care program supports service member job performance by meeting military-specific needs, such as those from frequent relocation, non-traditional working hours, and deployment. Officials also told GAO that DOD promotes military family financial well-being by subsidizing child care fees paid by families, and by making it possible for service members and their spouses to work. Pre-pandemic DOD surveys of military families showed general satisfaction with the quality of DOD child care. However, individuals from military family associations GAO interviewed said some families have expressed concerns about the affordability and availability of DOD child care. Concerns included long waitlists and the cost of care, especially for families of more junior service members. DOD officials told us the department is taking steps to address concerns, which include building more child development centers, expanding the pool of community-based providers that are potentially eligible to accept DOD-subsidized fee assistance, and increasing the amount of fee assistance available to families.

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# Contents

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Letter		1
	Background	5
	Research Links Quality Child Care to Positive Outcomes for Children, and DOD Has Taken Steps to Ensure Quality Care	10
	The DOD Child Care Program Supports Readiness by Providing Access to Care for Military Families	16
	Agency Comments	23
Appendix I	GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments	24
Table		
	Table 1: Selected Department of Defense Accreditation and Inspection Requirements for Its Child Care Programs	9
Figures		
	Figure 1: Elements of the Department of Defense’s Child Development Center Inspection Criteria	13
	Figure 2: Estimated Percentage of Active Duty Spouses with One or More Children at Home, in Each Age Range, in 2019	17

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## Abbreviations

CDC	Child Development Center
DOD	Department of Defense
FCC	Family Child Care
MCCYN	Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood

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February 2, 2023

Chair  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
United States Senate

The Honorable Mike Rogers  
Chairman  
The Honorable Adam Smith  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
House of Representatives

The Department of Defense (DOD) views child care as essential to overall mission readiness, retention, and recruitment for the U.S. military, and operates the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the United States, according to DOD.<sup>1</sup> Like civilians, many military service members need child care to perform their jobs. However, military families may have child care needs that differ from their civilian counterparts, due to the nature of their work (e.g., frequent relocations and routinely working early or late duty shifts). According to officials, DOD's child care program aims to promote the readiness of its service members and their families, by providing quality, available, and affordable care.<sup>2</sup>

As of September 2021, approximately 77,000 children were enrolled in DOD's child care program, and as of March 2022, DOD was providing fee assistance for the care of more than 25,800 additional children of service

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<sup>1</sup>Department of Defense, *Report to the Congressional Defense Committees on Department of Defense Child Development Programs* (Washington, D.C.: June 5, 2020). DOD defines readiness as the ability of military forces to fight and meet the demands of assigned missions.

<sup>2</sup>In a recent report, DOD defined military family readiness as a family's preparedness to effectively navigate the challenges of daily living experienced in the unique context of military service, and officials described service member readiness as being fully equipped (e.g., logistically, financially, and emotionally) to perform their jobs and support DOD's mission. Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congressional Defense Committees on the Department of Defense Policy and Plans for Military Family Readiness, Fiscal Year 2016, 7-27D27CD* (Mar. 17, 2017).

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members at eligible civilian child care providers in their community.<sup>3</sup> DOD child care is funded with a combination of appropriated funds and military families' child care payments; in fiscal year 2021, according to DOD, it spent more than \$1 billion in appropriated funds on its child care program.

A report accompanying Senate bill 1790, which was amended and enacted as the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, includes a provision for us to assess the DOD child care program.<sup>4</sup> This report describes (1) how DOD child care supports the learning and development of young children, and how DOD seeks to ensure its quality; and (2) how the DOD child care program supports the readiness of service members and their families.

To inform our findings across both objectives, we conducted three literature searches. First, to identify what is known about how DOD child care supports the learning and development of young children or service member readiness, we searched for relevant research published in the past 20 years.<sup>5</sup> We focused on studies that examined the DOD child care program and included data on outcomes for children or service member readiness, and found one study that met these criteria. This study focused primarily on outcomes related to service member readiness.<sup>6</sup> We then reviewed this study's methodology and findings. During the course of our work, DOD provided us with an additional study that examined learning and development outcomes for children in its child care centers.

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<sup>3</sup>These data are from DOD's Office of Military Family Readiness Policy's *Fiscal Year 2021 Child and Youth Program Annual Summary of Operations* report, an internal record. These are the most recent data DOD has available on its child care program.

<sup>4</sup>See S. Rep. No. 116-48, at 189 (2019) and Pub. L. No. 116-92, 133 Stat. 1198 (2019).

<sup>5</sup>We conducted this search in March 2022, using databases such as ProQuest and Scopus, and keywords related to the Department of Defense, child development programs, and outcomes.

<sup>6</sup>S. Gates, G. Zellman, and J. Moini, *Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, RAND National Defense Institute, 2006). While our initial search results included additional RAND Corporation studies, relevant findings from these studies were based on the same survey results that are analyzed and described in the 2006 study listed above, so we eliminated them from our review.

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We also reviewed this study, which was conducted by the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State and commissioned by DOD.<sup>7</sup>

We conducted two additional non-DOD-specific literature searches. To identify examples of the potential effects of high-quality child care on children, we searched for relevant peer-reviewed summaries of research and meta-analyses.<sup>8</sup> To identify examples of the potential effects of employer-provided child care on employees, we searched for relevant peer-reviewed studies.<sup>9</sup> For these two searches, we also included research from the past 20 years, and focused on identifying relevant examples to illustrate the potential effects of quality child care on children's learning and development and employer-provided child care on employees.

In addition, to describe the DOD child care program, we obtained and reviewed summary administrative data on the DOD child care program's operations for fiscal year 2021, the most recent data available. We also reviewed summary data of results from recent DOD surveys of service

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<sup>7</sup>Jennifer K. Karre et al., *Early Childhood Education (ECE) Project: Final Report on the Role that Military-Supported Early Childhood Education Plays in Promoting Child Development and School Readiness* (Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State University, Jan. 27, 2022). This study was released in August 2022, after we conducted our literature search. See more on this study in objective 1, below.

<sup>8</sup>While there is no universally accepted definition of "high-quality child care," we used search terms such as "quality", "accredited", or "licensed" to identify research that examined the effects of child care on children. We conducted this search in March and April 2022. To identify examples for our reporting, we then selected those that examined the effects of high-quality care (as identified in these studies) on children; included measurable outcome data; and focused on child care in the United States.

<sup>9</sup>In April 2022, we searched for studies on the employment-related effects of employer-provided child care benefits on employees. To identify examples for our reporting, we selected studies that discussed original data on measurable employment-related effects of employer-provided child care, focusing on child care in the United States.

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members in 2018<sup>10</sup> and their spouses in 2019,<sup>11</sup> to describe their perspectives on aspects of DOD-provided child care, such as availability and quality. Although a more recent version of the Status of Forces Survey was available (from 2020), we opted to use the 2018 Survey, since the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were particularly disruptive to child care operations in 2020.

We assessed the reliability of the summary administrative data by interviewing knowledgeable agency officials and reviewing related documentation. We found the administrative data to be sufficiently reliable to describe relevant aspects of the DOD child care program. For the DOD survey results, we assessed the data's reliability through reviewing technical documentation and interviewing knowledgeable officials from DOD's Office of People Analytics, which conducts the surveys described above. We found the summary survey data to be sufficiently reliable for the estimates we provide in this report, which describe military family characteristics and general satisfaction levels at the time the surveys were conducted.

For information on how DOD's child care program supports children's learning and development, how DOD seeks to ensure its quality, and how the program affects service members' readiness, we interviewed DOD officials from the Office of Military Family Readiness Policy, within the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Military Community and Family Policy. We also interviewed individuals from military family associations, and other stakeholders (individuals and

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<sup>10</sup>The margins of error in this report are based on 95 percent confidence intervals, and are +/- 5 percentage points or fewer, unless otherwise noted. Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, *2018 Status of Forces Survey (SOFS) of Active Duty Members: Tabulations of Responses*, OPA Report No. 2019-114 (Alexandria, Va.: September 2019). According to officials, DOD administers the SOFS annually, and includes questions related to child care in the survey, every 2 years. DOD administered this web-based survey from December 2018 to February 2019. The survey is intended to assess the attitudes and opinions of active duty members, on a range of personnel issues.

<sup>11</sup>The margins of error in this report are based on 95 percent confidence intervals, and are +/- 5 percentage points or fewer, unless otherwise noted. Department of Defense, Office of People Analytics, *2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS): Tabulations of Responses*, OPA Report No. 2020-048 (Alexandria, Va.: June 2020). According to DOD officials, DOD generally administers the ADSS every 2 years. It is the agency's primary source of information on the military spouse experience and covers a range of topics on military spouses, including information on demographics, families, and use of DOD programs and services. This survey was administered, by both web and paper-and-pen questionnaires, from July 2019 to November 2019.

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organizations) with knowledge of the DOD child care program, including former DOD officials and researchers who have studied the DOD child care program.<sup>12</sup> Although content from these interviews is not generalizable, it provides context for and insight into potential experiences of and perspectives from military families and others who are knowledgeable about the DOD child care program. Finally, to inform our work on both objectives, we reviewed DOD policies and other agency documents related to the operation and oversight of its child care program. We also reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, as well as related reports from GAO, DOD, and the Congressional Research Service.<sup>13</sup>

We conducted this performance audit from November 2021 to February 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

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## Background

Many U.S. workers require child care to perform their jobs. In 2021, on average, more than half of all families with young children had both parents in the workforce, and more than two-thirds of single parents with young children were employed.<sup>14</sup> However, working parents may struggle to access child care, especially quality care that is affordable.<sup>15</sup> Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for child care in the U.S. exceeded supply. An analysis of 2019 data from 35 states attempted

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<sup>12</sup>We interviewed representatives from Blue Star Families and the National Military Family Association. We identified these military family associations and stakeholders to interview through a combination of methods, including reviewing publications on DOD child care and asking other interviewees for recommendations.

<sup>13</sup>GAO recently published an additional report that included information on aspects of DOD's child care program. See GAO, *Military Child Care: Potential Costs and Impacts of Expanding Off-Base Child Care Assistance for Children of Deceased Servicemembers*, [GAO-22-105186](https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-22-105186) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 14, 2021).

<sup>14</sup>Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Families with own children: Employment status of parents by age of youngest child and family type, 2020-2021 annual averages," accessed October 19, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/famee.t04.htm>. This analysis covers those families with children under 6 years old.

<sup>15</sup>In this report, we use the term "parents" to describe the parents, guardians, or other responsible caregivers for children.



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to measure the “child care gap,” and found that almost 3.5 million (more than 30 percent of) young children, with all available parents in the workforce, came from families without access to formal child care.<sup>16</sup> The effects of COVID-19 reduced the supply of child care. For example, one study found that a total of almost 8,900 child care centers closed from December 2019 to March 2021, representing a 9 percent loss in the 37 states for which the researchers had data.<sup>17</sup>

Even when child care is available, it can be difficult for families to afford and can cost more than other major household expenses. The annual price of child care for two children exceeded median annual mortgage payments for homeowners in 40 states and the District of Columbia, according to one 2018 analysis.<sup>18</sup> According to another analysis, it would take more than 10 percent of median household income for a married couple, and 35 percent of median household income for a single parent, to cover the cost of care for one child.<sup>19</sup> As a measure of child care affordability, the Administration for Children and Families, as part of its Child Care and Development Fund rulemaking, recommended states use a benchmark of 7 percent or less of a household’s income in establishing their sliding fee scales and determining what constitutes a cost barrier for families.<sup>20</sup>

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## DOD’s Child Care Program

The DOD child care system originated in the 1970s, with informal efforts on military bases to provide military families with ad hoc, part-time care. The program grew as military demographics shifted and military spouses increasingly entered the workforce.<sup>21</sup> After reports in the 1980s raised

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<sup>16</sup>L. Smith, A. Bagley, B. Wolters, *Child Care in 35 States: What we know and don’t know* (Washington, D.C.: Bipartisan Policy Center, November 2021).

<sup>17</sup>Child Care Aware of America, *Demanding Change: Repairing our Child Care System* (2022).

<sup>18</sup>Child Care Aware of America, *The U.S. and the High Price of Child Care: An Examination of a Broken System* (Arlington, Va.: 2019). This analysis did not focus on DOD child care.

<sup>19</sup>Child Care Aware of America, *Demanding Change*.

<sup>20</sup>81 Fed. Reg. 67,438, 67,467-68, 67,515 (Nov. 29, 2016).

<sup>21</sup>G. Zellman, S. Gates, M. Cho, and R. Shaw, *Options for Improving the Military Child Care System* (RAND Corporation, RAND National Defense Research Institute: Santa Monica, Calif., 2008).

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concerns about the quality and safety of DOD child care,<sup>22</sup> the Military Child Care Act of 1989 was enacted to improve the quality, safety, availability, and affordability of military child care.<sup>23</sup>

As of September 2021, approximately 49,300 children were enrolled in DOD's on-base child development centers (CDC), 24,700 children were enrolled in DOD's school-age care programs, and 2,700 children were receiving care in DOD family child care (FCC) homes.<sup>24</sup> When on-base care is not available at certain locations, or service members' homes are not located near a base, DOD offers fee assistance to families who obtain care at eligible civilian child care providers in their community.<sup>25</sup> As of March 2022, DOD was providing this fee assistance for the care of more than 25,800 children of service members.

In fiscal year 2021, DOD spent more than \$1 billion in appropriated funds on its child care program, which included almost \$770 million on CDCs, \$109 million on school-age care, over \$20 million on family child care, and an additional \$123 million on fee assistance for community-based child care, according to DOD. The department also collected more than \$293 million in fee payments from families.

DOD and individual military services (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) have roles in implementing and overseeing DOD's child care

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<sup>22</sup>For example, see GAO, *Military Child Care Programs: Progress Made, More Needed*, [GAO/FPCD-82-30](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 1, 1982).

<sup>23</sup>The Military Child Care Act of 1989 was enacted as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 1990 and 1991. Pub. L. No. 101-189, tit. XV, 103 Stat. 1352, 1589 (1989).

<sup>24</sup>These data are from DOD's Office of Military Family Readiness Policy's *Fiscal Year 2021 Child and Youth Program Annual Summary of Operations* report, an internal record. These are the most recent data DOD has available on its child care program, and DOD officials said these data points do not change significantly from year to year. According to officials, Space Force child care information is included in Air Force child care totals in these summary data. According to DOD officials, almost all CDCs are located on-base; DOD-administered family child care homes may be located on- or off-base. See table 1 for more information.

<sup>25</sup>Fee assistance eligibility varies by military service, and fee assistance may not be available to service members at all locations. For example, Navy offers fee assistance to service members who do not live near a base, or to those stationed at eligible bases that have historically had long waitlists for child care, according to one official.

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system.<sup>26</sup> DOD's Office of Military Family Readiness Policy coordinates department-level policy, provides high-level oversight, and collects and compiles program data. The military services set service-level policies and requirements, design and operate their child care programs, and conduct oversight activities.

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## Accreditation and Oversight Requirements

In the civilian sector, child care programs generally must adhere to state licensing standards to operate legally in a given state, and may also choose to pursue accreditation, which focuses on the quality of care.<sup>27</sup> States have developed their own child care licensing standards, and oversight and enforcement practices vary across states. For accreditation, national accrediting organizations establish and use quality standards (e.g., related to staff training and support, leadership and management, or curricula) to assess the quality of child care programs. Only a small percentage of child care providers in the U.S. are accredited—a Child Care Aware of America survey estimated that 9 percent of all center-based programs and 2 percent of family child care homes in the U.S. were, in 2019.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, as of September 2021, DOD data showed that 97 percent of its CDCs and 99 percent of its school-age care centers were nationally accredited.<sup>29</sup>

Within DOD, child care facilities are subject to federal statutory requirements, including an accreditation requirement for all CDCs,

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<sup>26</sup>See Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs* (Aug. 5, 2014) (incorporating change 2, effective Sept. 1, 2020). The Air Force implements and oversees the child care program on behalf of the Space Force, according to officials. The Coast Guard also operates its own child care program. GAO recently published a report that included information on how the Coast Guard's program compares to DOD's. See GAO, *Military Child Care: Coast Guard is Taking Steps to Increase Access for Families*, [GAO-22-105262](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022).

<sup>27</sup>States may exempt certain child care providers (e.g., facilities serving a small number of children, recreation programs, or religious programs) from licensing requirements. National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, *Trends in Child Care Center Licensing Requirements for 2020 Brief #1* (Fairfax, Va.: 2022).

<sup>28</sup>Child Care Aware of America, *Picking Up the Pieces: Building a Better Child Care System Post COVID-19* (Arlington, Va.: 2020)

<sup>29</sup>According to DOD officials, the non-accredited CDCs and school-age care centers are in the process of renewing their accreditation, or lapses exist because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

required training elements for staff, and inspection requirements.<sup>30</sup> DOD child care providers must pass multiple inspections, annually, to be certified to operate by DOD, according to officials. (See table 1.)

**Table 1: Selected Department of Defense Accreditation and Inspection Requirements for Its Child Care Programs**

Program name	Program description	Accreditation requirement	Inspection requirements
Child Development Centers	DOD-operated on-base child care centers, typically offering care for children from birth to 5 years of age.	Must be accredited by national accrediting body.	Unannounced DOD inspections at least four times a year.
School-Age Care	DOD-operated, on-base before- and after-school care and summer/holiday care for children 6-12 years old.	Must be accredited by national accrediting body.	Unannounced DOD inspections at least four times a year.
Family Child Care (FCC)	Care operated in DOD-certified on-base or off-base homes, for children from birth through 12 years of age.	Encouraged (not required) to be accredited.	Unannounced DOD inspections at least four times a year; monthly inspections by a DOD FCC administrator. <sup>a</sup>
Fee assistance (civilian, community-based child care providers)	DOD subsidies for parents to use at eligible civilian child care providers, when DOD child care is not available (due to a lack of available spaces or the distance service members live away from base).	Child care centers must be accredited by a national accrediting body. <sup>b</sup> Family child care homes must be accredited by a national accrediting body or have obtained another qualifying credential.	Subject to state licensing requirements and oversight.

Source: Department of Defense (DOD) documents and interviews with officials. | GAO-23-105518

<sup>a</sup>According to DOD officials, off-base FCC providers in the DOD program may also be subject to state licensing and oversight requirements.

<sup>b</sup>DOD's Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) (fee assistance) program requires that participating centers be nationally accredited. In 2019, DOD expanded its fee assistance program by creating MCCYN-PLUS, which allows non-accredited child care centers that are quality rated by their state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, to be eligible for fee assistance, in participating states.

<sup>30</sup>10 U.S.C. §§ 1791-1800. DOD child care facilities located on military bases are generally exempt from state licensing requirements, but are subject to operating requirements and oversight practices established by DOD. A 2013 Child Care Aware of America report, which evaluated and compared the child care center program requirements and oversight practices of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and DOD, assigned DOD the highest (best) overall score and ranking of the group. Child Care Aware of America, *We Can Do Better: Child Care Aware of America's Ranking of State Child Care Center Regulations and Oversight, 2013 Update* (Arlington, Va.: 2013).

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## Research Links Quality Child Care to Positive Outcomes for Children, and DOD Has Taken Steps to Ensure Quality Care

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### Little Research Exists on the Effects of DOD Child Care, but Broader Research Suggests Benefits from Quality Care

Our review of literature from the past 20 years identified one study specific to the DOD child care program, but this study focused on service member readiness outcomes and not on learning and development outcomes for children in DOD child care programs.<sup>31</sup> In January 2022, the Clearinghouse for Military Family Readiness at Penn State completed a study commissioned by DOD, which was released in August 2022.<sup>32</sup> The goal of this study was to examine the DOD child care program and its outcomes for children and parents.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and other factors seriously limited data collection and analysis for this study. Specifically, due to COVID-19-related child care closures and other pandemic-related effects on children and parents, researchers were not able to collect data on the program and its outcomes over time, as planned. Also, researchers told us that relatively small numbers of children and classrooms participated in the study, due in part to difficulty recruiting civilian providers, which also affected researchers' ability to analyze and draw conclusions from collected data. As a result, while the study provides some descriptive information, its ability to estimate the effects of DOD child care on child and parent outcomes was significantly limited. DOD officials told us they have no plans to conduct another evaluation of DOD's child care program at this time, and plan to focus their resources on meeting child care needs, including recruiting and retaining staff.

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<sup>31</sup>S. Gates, G. Zellman, and J. Moini, *Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families*.

<sup>32</sup>J. Karre et al., *Early Childhood Education Project*.

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In addition, some non-DOD specific research indicates that quality child care is linked to positive outcomes for children.<sup>33</sup> For example, one large review of studies from 2007 found that attending high-quality child care is associated with better cognitive, social, and language development for children, as well as fewer behavioral problems in the early grade-school years, compared to children who attended care that did not meet quality standards.<sup>34</sup>

This review describes standards that the American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have established for assessing the quality of child care. These standards cover aspects of care, such as age-based child-to-caregiver ratios, group size, health and safety practices, and qualifications of and continuing education for child care providers. Consistent with these standards, the review suggests that low child-to-caregiver ratios, small group size, and well-trained caregivers result in higher-quality care. The review also found that higher quality in these areas increases the likelihood that children will have higher-quality experiences while in child care, such as supportive interactions with caregivers, positive interactions with peers, and opportunities for cognitively stimulating play.

Researchers studying child care outcomes face challenges in assessing the effects of child care quality on children's development, including the difficulty of isolating effects of child care from other factors (e.g., family characteristics).<sup>35</sup> DOD officials we spoke with and reports we reviewed also have noted inherent challenges in measuring outcomes for DOD's family readiness programs, including child care.<sup>36</sup> For example, tracking participants and their outcomes can be difficult, given that military families move locations frequently (due to duty station changes). It can also take a long time for certain effects of child care services to be measurable (e.g.,

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<sup>33</sup>R. Bradley and D. Vandell, "Child Care and the Well-being of Children," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, vol. 161, no. 7 (2007) and D. Vandell, "Early Child Care: The Known and the Unknown," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 3 (2004).

<sup>34</sup>Bradley and Vandell, "Child Care and the Well-being of Children."

<sup>35</sup>Some of the research we reviewed measured child outcomes such as school readiness, cognitive performance, social-emotional development, and long-term adaptive functioning.

<sup>36</sup>Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the Congressional Defense Committees on the Department of Defense Policy and Plans for Military Family Readiness, Fiscal Year 2016*, 7-27D27CD (Mar. 17, 2017).

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the time between enrolling infants in child care and their entry into kindergarten, if assessing school readiness).

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## DOD Seeks to Ensure Quality Child Care by Overseeing Program Requirements, Providing Training, and Collecting Feedback from Military Families

**Program requirements and oversight.** In its policies, DOD has established standard requirements intended to ensure the quality of care in its child care program. For example, DOD's CDCs, school-age care programs, and most of the community-based providers receiving DOD fee assistance, must be accredited by a DOD-approved national accrediting organization.<sup>37</sup> One stakeholder said she considers DOD child care to be high-quality primarily because of this requirement. DOD officials also said the accreditation requirement is a key difference that promotes high-quality care when compared to civilian child care programs.

DOD policy also requires that its child care program staff complete a training program, both when they start their jobs and on a recurring annual basis.<sup>38</sup> Each CDC is also required to have at least one training and curriculum specialist on-site. This specialist is responsible for ensuring all staff complete required trainings and related knowledge assessments, observing classrooms regularly to evaluate staff's demonstration of training-related competencies, and assisting directors with obtaining and maintaining center accreditation, according to officials. One stakeholder said that the requirement for training and curriculum specialists was very helpful in ensuring quality care, and was an important difference from civilian child care centers, where training specialists may be on-site only for a few hours a month.

In its policy, DOD also establishes inspection requirements for its child care programs. (See figure 1, for elements of DOD's CDC inspection criteria, which help to ensure its programs meet quality care standards.) Specifically, the policy states that DOD CDCs, school-age care facilities, and FCC homes must undergo at least four unannounced on-site inspections a year. These inspections are to cover health, sanitation, fire, and safety standards. In addition, during inspections conducted by DOD headquarters, inspectors will observe classrooms for curriculum








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<sup>37</sup>DOD's Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN) fee assistance program requires that centers be nationally accredited. In 2019, DOD expanded its fee assistance program by creating MCCYN-PLUS, which allows non-accredited child centers that are quality rated by their state's Quality Rating and Improvement System, to be eligible for fee assistance, in certain states. Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs* (Aug. 5, 2014) (incorporating change 2, effective Sept. 1, 2020).

<sup>38</sup>Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs*.

implementation and for staff-to-child, as well as child-to-child, interactions. Inspectors are also expected to review parent feedback on the center.<sup>39</sup>

**Figure 1: Elements of the Department of Defense’s Child Development Center Inspection Criteria**

	<b>Staff Training and Development</b>	Child care staff have completed or are on track to complete required competency-based training.
	<b>Staff to Child Ratios and Group Sizes</b>	Staff-to-child ratios and group sizes are maintained indoors and outdoors.
	<b>Learning Activities and Interactions</b>	The center fosters positive relationships between care staff and children.
	<b>Curriculum</b>	The center has a curriculum in place, with developmentally appropriate activities and experiences for children.
	<b>Safety and Emergency Management</b>	The center has established policies and procedures to ensure fire safety and emergency management.
	<b>Indoor and Outdoor Environment</b>	Indoor and outdoor environments meet space and operational requirements and support staff needs.
	<b>Parent Communication and Involvement</b>	The program provides parents with information on policies and offerings, and encourages parents to be involved.

Source: Department of Defense (DOD) Office of the Secretary of Defense 2022 Inspection Criteria for Child Development Centers. | GAO-23-105518

According to one stakeholder, these program requirements and oversight practices ensure DOD child care standards are enforced, in contrast to civilian child care, where enforcement might not be as consistent.<sup>40</sup> This

<sup>39</sup>Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs*.

<sup>40</sup>According to a 2017 survey, only four out of 52 respondents (which included the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and American Samoa) reported that they inspect licensed child care centers more than three times a year; 27 states reported inspecting licensed child care centers once a year, and one reported conducting inspections once every 3 years. Clifford Schmidt, Kathryn Schmidt, and Tara Lynne Orłowski, *2017 Child Care Licensing Study* (National Association for Regulatory Administration).



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stakeholder said these processes also help parents feel confident in the quality of DOD child care.

**Updates to staff training and curriculum.** In 2016, DOD implemented a new online platform with content for training its direct-care providers, directors, and other staff, which the department developed in partnership with early care and education faculty and staff from The Ohio State University, according to officials. Officials said the new online training platform replaced a paper-based training model that had been in place since 1990, with few updates. The online research-informed program includes 15 courses, which are aligned with the Child Development Associate credential competency model.<sup>41</sup> According to officials, The Ohio State University has also developed an associate's degree linked to this training program, and will grant 13 credit hours toward an associate's degree in early childhood education to those DOD staff who have completed the training.

Officials explained that DOD also recently launched a new early school readiness curriculum for infant, toddler, and preschooler education, which it developed in collaboration with early care and education faculty and staff from Purdue University. The curriculum is aligned with accreditation standards from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and incorporates developmentally appropriate activities for each age group—infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. It also includes guidance for how parents can incorporate related content into learning activities at home. Officials said that they have received positive feedback from staff about the quality of the new curriculum, and from parents about their ability to support their child's learning at home.

As of August 2022, officials said that the Air Force and Marine Corps have fully implemented the new curriculum. According to officials, while the Army and Navy have not adopted this curriculum, they use a different research-based curriculum, which is also aligned with accreditation standards and incorporates developmentally appropriate activities for children. According to DOD officials, while not every military service has adopted the new DOD curriculum, they hope that reports of positive

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<sup>41</sup>The Child Development Associate credential program is for professionals working in early childhood education (serving children from birth to 5 years old). The Council for Professional Recognition sets policies and procedures related to the credential, publishes the competency standards involved, and administers assessments.

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experiences with the curriculum will result in the remaining military services doing so as well.

**Collecting service member and stakeholder perspectives.** In addition to obtaining parent feedback during its inspections, DOD routinely collects feedback from service members and their spouses through its surveys. The Status of Forces Survey and Survey of Active Duty Spouses collect information on aspects of military life, including its child care program, to better understand and respond to military families' needs and concerns. Through these surveys, service members have reported high satisfaction with DOD's child care program. For example, DOD's 2018 Status of Forces Survey estimated that, of those using child care, about three-quarters of active duty service members were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of on-base child care,<sup>42</sup> while two-thirds were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of off-base child care.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, representatives from military family associations we spoke with described DOD child care as high-quality and reported high levels of parent satisfaction with DOD child care. A representative from one association said parents generally see on-base CDCs as their top choice for care and expressed satisfaction with DOD child care centers' staff training, learning philosophy, curriculum, and diversity of faculty, administration, and students.

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<sup>42</sup>The margin of error is +/- 6 percentage points. On-base child care could include care in DOD CDCs, school-age care, or family child care homes. This estimate represents active duty members who had children or other dependents age 13 or younger who routinely use on-base child care so they and/or their spouse can work. We do not have evidence that differences between estimates of on-base and off-base satisfaction levels are statistically significant.

<sup>43</sup>The margin of error is +/- 7 percentage points. Off-base care could include providers receiving fee assistance from DOD or providers with no affiliation with DOD child care. This estimate represents active duty members who had children or other dependents age 13 or younger who routinely use off-base child care so they and/or their spouse can work. We do not have evidence that differences between estimates of on-base and off-base satisfaction levels are statistically significant.

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## The DOD Child Care Program Supports Readiness by Providing Access to Care for Military Families

Research, Stakeholders, and DOD Officials Identified Important Ways Child Care Supports Readiness, Such as Promoting Job Performance and Financial Well-Being

Our literature review found that little research exists on the effects of the DOD child care program on service members. However, we identified some non-DOD specific research that found that employer-sponsored child care is associated with improved employment-based outcomes for workers, including better employee performance, increased organizational commitment, and decreased absenteeism.<sup>44</sup>

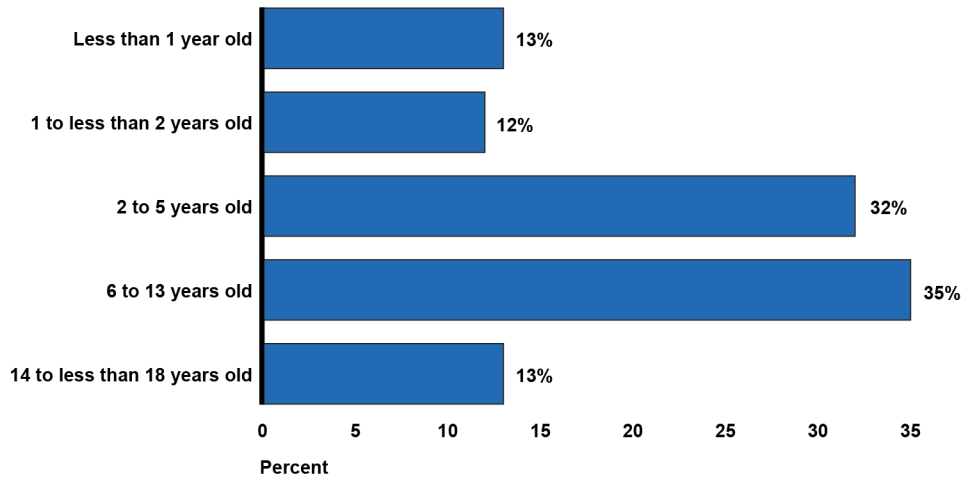
Similarly, representatives we spoke with from military family associations, other stakeholders, and DOD officials described important ways in which child care enhances service member and family readiness, including by supporting service member job performance, improving retention, decreasing absenteeism, and promoting families' financial well-being.

**Service member job performance.** Given the substantial share of service members who have children, child care plays an important role in enabling service members to perform their jobs. According to DOD's 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, an estimated two-thirds (67 percent) of active duty spouses have children under the age of 18 living at home. (See fig. 2.)

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<sup>44</sup>M. Feeney and J. Stritch, "Family-Friendly Policies, Gender, and Work-Life Balance in the Public Sector," *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2019); L. Hipp, T. Morrissey, and M. Warner, "Who Participates and Who Benefits from Employer-Provided Child-Care Assistance?" *Journal and Marriage and Family*, vol. 79 (2017); N. Gullekson, R. Griffeth, J. Vancouver, C. Kovner, and D. Cohen, "Vouching for childcare assistance with two quasi-experimental studies," *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 8 (2014); and P. Ratnasingam, C. Spitzmueller, W. King, C. Rubino, A. Luksyte, R. Matthews, and G. Fisher, "Can On-Site Childcare Have Detrimental Work Outcomes? Examining the Moderating Roles of Family Supportive Organization Perceptions and Childcare Satisfaction," *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2012).

**Figure 2: Estimated Percentage of Active Duty Spouses with One or More Children at Home, in Each Age Range, in 2019**



Source: Department of Defense (DOD). | GAO-23-105518

Note: Data are from DOD's 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses (ADSS): Tabulations of Responses, OPA Report No. 2020-048 (Alexandria, Va.: June 2020). These estimates have a margin of error of plus or minus 2 percentage points, at the 95 percent confidence level.

According to two stakeholders and representatives from two military family associations, child care supports job performance primarily by making parents available for duty. Moreover, quality care gives parents peace of mind regarding their children's well-being, which allows them to focus on their mission-related work. The nature of military jobs creates specific child care needs and DOD officials and stakeholders described how DOD meets these needs, such as those created by frequent relocation, non-traditional working hours, and deployment.<sup>45</sup>

- **Frequent relocation.** Service members are often required to move to new locations, sometimes making change-of-station moves every 2 to 3 years, which can disrupt child care arrangements. To facilitate families' finding child care in a new location, DOD operates a website (MilitaryChildCare.com) that allows families to request and track the status of requests for all available DOD child care in an area. DOD officials said this centralized resource helps ease the burden of

<sup>45</sup>Beginning December 27, 2022, military departments are also encouraged to seek out public and private partnerships to provide child care to personnel. Recently enacted legislation requires DOD to take action in certain areas of its child care program, including conducting a feasibility study on expanding 24-hour care, increasing availability of care, reducing waitlist sizes, and establishing and expanding a pilot program that provides fee assistance to some families using in-home child care. See 10 U.S.C. § 1791 note.

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making new child care arrangements as families relocate, and that the consistency of DOD child care standards and quality of care across military bases further streamline the relocation process and create peace of mind for parents. Officials also said that all DOD child care programs partner with on-base military family readiness centers to connect families to resources that support families during these moves, such as military family life consultants and moving checklists.

- **Non-traditional working hours.** Specialized positions, training exercises, and drills require some service members to work during non-traditional hours, such as at night or on weekends. Recognizing this, in some circumstances, DOD works to provide child care options for these service members, including 24-hour and extended-hour care through FCC homes and some DOD CDCs. For example, military base commanders may work directly with CDCs and other DOD providers to offer child care support when specific training exercises or drills are scheduled at non-traditional hours. In June 2021, DOD also added an option on its MilitaryChildCare.com website to allow families to request 24-hour and extended-hour child care, where needed.
- **Deployment.** Many military families need additional child care when a service member is deployed. According to DOD's 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, an estimated 62 percent of military spouses with children living at home experienced an increased need for child care as a result of their spouse being deployed.<sup>46</sup> DOD provides additional flexibility for these families, expanding their available child care options by allowing them to receive fee assistance for child care from providers who might be exempt from certain requirements. For example, deployed service members' families may be able to receive fee assistance for child care in facilities that are not accredited, but are state licensed and annually inspected. Military family life consultants, who are familiar with aspects of military life and related issues, are also available at DOD child care facilities to provide specialized support to enrolled children and their parents, who may be facing deployment-related challenges. Individual military services may

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<sup>46</sup>This estimate represents active duty member spouses who had a child living at home and who identified one child living at home during their spouse's most recent deployment; it excludes those who reported that they had not used child care.

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also provide additional services to families of deployed service members, including hourly respite care, at no cost to families.<sup>47</sup>

**Retention.** DOD views child care as an important resource to promote service member retention, and a 2006 RAND Corporation study on DOD child care suggested that child care concerns may influence families' decisions related to staying in or leaving the military.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, representatives from one military family association said that some service member families reported that they would need to leave the military and seek employment elsewhere if they were unable to access child care.

**Absenteeism.** Lack of child care can lead service members to be late to or miss work altogether, which substantially impacts service member readiness. For example, an estimated 24 percent of active duty service members or their spouses, who used or reported needing child care, missed 9 or more days of work a year due to a lack of child care, according to data from DOD's 2018 Status of Forces Survey.<sup>49</sup> In addition, the same 2006 RAND Corporation study noted above found that child care interruptions, such as being late to or missing work to care for a sick child, may negatively influence the readiness of service members, with a greater effect on females.<sup>50</sup>

**Family financial well-being.** Child care also plays an important role in promoting financial well-being for military families, especially by enabling both service members and their spouses to work, according to military family association representatives and DOD officials. According to DOD's 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses, an estimated 42 percent of military spouses with children living at home routinely use child care arrangements so that they and/or their spouse can work. Working

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<sup>47</sup>DOD defines respite care as occasional, intermittent care for children that provides a parent or guardian temporary respite from their role as a primary caregiver. Department of Defense Instruction 6060.02, *Child Development Programs*.

<sup>48</sup>In this study, RAND surveyed approximately 1,000 service members. S. Gates, G. Zellman, and J. Moini, *Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families*.

<sup>49</sup>The estimate represents active duty members who had children or other legal dependents age 13 or younger, who either routinely use child care so they (and/or their spouse) can work, or who do not routinely use child care but need child care arrangements so they (and/or their spouse) can work.

<sup>50</sup>S. Gates, G. Zellman, and J. Moini, *Examining Child Care Need Among Military Families*.

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spouses, and particularly those who were service members themselves, were especially likely to use child care, with an estimated 64 percent of working spouses and 89 percent of dual-military spouses (with children living at home) routinely using child care arrangements so they and/or their spouse could work.<sup>51</sup>

The DOD child care program also seeks to support military spouses by employing them as child care staff. According to officials, military spouses made up approximately 30 percent of staff for DOD child care providers, as of September 2021. To support their continued employment, during change-of-station moves, the program offers spouses of active duty service members, working as caregivers in one location, employment transfers to the family's new location.

To promote military family financial well-being, DOD has also worked to make its child care affordable for military families, according to officials. For example, DOD subsidizes the cost of care in its CDCs. Officials said parents pay roughly half of the cost of DOD child care, on average, with the department covering the remaining cost.<sup>52</sup> To promote affordability, parent fees for DOD child care are based on total household income and are structured so that DOD charges lower fees to households with lower incomes. To further reduce costs for families, DOD also offers fee discounts for families with multiple children in its child care program, and military bases have discretion to grant families hardship waivers to decrease child care fees under certain circumstances.

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### Affordability and Availability of DOD Child Care Have Been a Concern for Some Military Families, but DOD Is Taking Steps to Address Shortfalls

Even with the above measures in place, military family association representatives we spoke with said that some families, particularly those with more junior service members, found it difficult to afford on-base child care. They also said that when on-base child care was unavailable, families needed to use community-based, civilian child care centers, which can be more expensive than on-base care, even with fee assistance from DOD.

According to DOD officials, the department has worked to ensure that all child care is more affordable for families, whether on-base or in the

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<sup>51</sup>These estimates represent active duty spouses who had children age 13 or younger. DOD, *2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses*.

<sup>52</sup>The law reflects the policy of Congress that DOD make available from appropriated funds at least as much as it expects in parent fees collected for operating expenses for DOD child care, during a fiscal year. 10 U.S.C. § 1791(a).

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community. For example, DOD increased the maximum amount of potential fee assistance, per month, per child, in fiscal year 2022, and again in fiscal year 2023. DOD has also worked to standardize fee assistance levels across the military services.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, representatives from two military family associations said that, for some families who do not live on-base, the location of on-base child care can be less convenient than community-based child care. According to DOD officials, while almost all CDCs are located on military bases, about three-quarters of active duty spouses live off-base, according to estimates from the 2019 Survey of Active Duty Spouses. DOD officials said that they believe most military families like the location of on-base child care, even if they live off-base. They said that, generally, service members are already traveling to bases to report to work, and that having their children nearby during the workday provides parents with a sense of security. Officials also noted that families who do not live near a military base can apply for DOD fee assistance for qualifying off-base care, should they choose.<sup>54</sup>

For military families who prefer to use on-base care, representatives from military family associations also told us that a lack of available child care spaces at CDCs has been a concern for some families. One association's representatives said many military parents would like to use DOD CDCs, but waitlists can be long, with care sometimes being unavailable for 6 to 7 months at a time. According to another association, military spouse caregivers identified improving access to child care as a top priority.

DOD officials said they were aware of families' concerns and recognize that service member parents need child care to perform their mission-related responsibilities and to attain family financial well-being. Officials said that the DOD child care program has encountered challenges in supplying sufficient child care spaces to meet demand—particularly in

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<sup>53</sup>In 2020, we reported on DOD's assessment of the fee assistance it provided to community-based child care providers, across the military services, and DOD efforts to reduce waitlists for child care on military bases. See GAO, *Military Child Care: Off-Base Financial Assistance and Wait Lists for On-Base Care*, [GAO-21-127R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 1, 2020).

<sup>54</sup>DOD may also offer fee assistance to families when on-base care is not available at certain locations, for example at locations that have long waitlists.



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certain geographic areas.<sup>55</sup> These challenges include capacity shortfalls, staffing shortages, and a lack of eligible child care providers for DOD's fee assistance program. Further, officials said that the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated these challenges.

To address these concerns and challenges, DOD has taken a number of steps to increase the number of child care spaces available to military families, including options that are both on- and off-base.<sup>56</sup> For example:

- The department is working to build additional CDCs to increase the number of spaces available in DOD-provided child care. In fiscal year 2022, DOD appropriations included funding to build seven additional CDCs.<sup>57</sup>
- To address CDC staffing shortfalls, DOD officials told us that they had launched a national child care staff recruitment effort in 2021, Come Grow with Us. As part of this effort, DOD is reaching out to colleges and universities near military bases to recruit students and recent graduates for child care positions. According to officials, the military services have also made efforts to enhance recruitment and retention of child care staff, which include increasing wages and offering bonuses.
- According to officials, as of August 2022, DOD is also in the process of developing a contract for a nonprofit organization to provide additional center-based child care off-base for military children. This effort will focus on areas where there is high demand for, high cost of, and low availability of care. Officials said they expect this effort to be funded in fiscal year 2023.
- In 2019, DOD launched the Military Child Care in Your Neighborhood (MCCYN)-PLUS initiative, to expand the pool of child care providers eligible for DOD fee assistance. It does so by allowing some providers to qualify by using participating states' child care quality ratings, rather

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<sup>55</sup>Officials identified the following areas as having DOD's greatest child care need: Norfolk, Virginia; San Diego, California; San Antonio, Texas; Hawaii; and the Washington, D.C. area.

<sup>56</sup>DOD is required to take necessary steps to reduce the waiting lists for child care on military bases. Pub. L. No. 116-92, tit. V, § 580(c)(1), 133 Stat. 1198, 1407 (2019) (codified at 10 U.S.C. § 1791 note).

<sup>57</sup>Military Construction Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022. Pub. L. No. 117-81, tit. XLVI, § 4601, 135 Stat. 2161, 2315-24 (2021).

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than national accreditation.<sup>58</sup> As of January 2023, DOD has implemented this program in Maryland, Virginia, Nevada, Texas, Washington state, Colorado, and part of Florida, and is working to expand the program in several states, including California, North Carolina, Kentucky, Arkansas, Ohio, New Jersey, and the rest of Florida, according to officials.

- In 2021, the department launched the In-Home Child Care Provider Pilot program. This program offers fee assistance to military families, in selected locations, who use in-home child care providers, such as nannies. DOD launched this 5-year pilot in areas with the highest levels of child care need, and officials said they are working to expand the program.

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## Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to DOD for review and comment. DOD provided technical comments that we incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of Defense, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov). Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix I.



Kathryn A. Larin  
Director, Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues

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<sup>58</sup>Qualifying centers must also be state licensed (including being inspected at least annually) and conduct background checks for employees, according to DOD officials.

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# Appendix I: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

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## GAO Contact

Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov)

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## Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Nora Boretti (Assistant Director), Margaret Hettinger (Analyst in Charge), Robin Marion, and Elisabeth Schaerr Garlock made significant contributions to this report. Also contributing to this report were James Ashley, Daniel Dye, Alison Grantham, Gina Hoover, Kristen Jones, Skye Kwong, Aaron Olszewski, and Joy Solmonson.

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