



Frequently Asked Questions on the Steps to Excellence Project (STEP)



1. What is Steps to Excellence Project (STEP)?

STEP is a method to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in child care and development programs.

2. Who developed STEP?

STEP was developed by the County of Los Angeles Policy Roundtable for Child Care. On December 12, 2006, the County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors endorsed the program and STEP was launched July 1, 2007.

The Office of Child Care, within the Service Integration Branch of the Chief Executive Office, is responsible for the coordination of STEP and its services.

3. How will STEP benefit my program?

Your program will have the opportunity to participate in one or all of the following:

- a. STEP creates a reason and a framework to engage staff, parents, and other stakeholders in a thorough program review.
- b. STEP participants will have the option to request funding to implement program quality improvements directly related to the STEP standards.
- c. STEP participants will have priority for participating in a variety of training activities aimed at improving STEP scores.
- d. STEP participants will receive – at no cost - on-site reviews using the appropriate Environment Rating Scale(s) and the Adult Involvement Scale.
- e. Participating STEP programs will be listed on the Office of Child Care Web site and actively promoted throughout the community.

4. Why is STEP necessary?

- a. Community Care Licensing regulations address health and safety, they do not address program quality.
- b. Accreditation programs by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) do address quality standards, but less than eight percent of child care centers and less than two percent of family child care homes in Los Angeles County are accredited.
- c. With the exception of Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) classrooms, objective and reliable information on child care quality is not available to families seeking child care in Los Angeles County.



- d. In 1999, it was estimated that parent fees and government subsidies for child care and development services in Los Angeles County totaled \$1.4 billion. Since 1999, the child care supply has increased and new subsidies have been introduced. Despite these investments, there is little information available on the quality of child care services being purchased.

5. Why aren't health and safety standards enough? Is child care quality really that important?

- a. **Capacity:** In Los Angeles County, we have the capacity to care for over 300,000 children in licensed child care, yet we have no idea of the quality of care provided.
- b. **Brain development:** "How infants experience the world and other people impacts how their brains become organized, which neurons become connected, and which are discarded. Positive and nurturing experiences affect the brain in significantly different ways than do negative or stressful experiences. The majority of a child's neural connections become "hardwired" by age three, and these connections are responsible for the child's major cognitive and emotional functioning", (*Growing Up Healthy* by Rebecca Parlakian).
- c. **School readiness:** A variety of studies have shown that children who participated in high quality child care and development programs had better cognitive and social skills upon entering the K-12 education system, lower enrollment rates in special education, higher high school graduation rates, fewer arrests and higher rates of employment than their peers who did not participate in such programs, (Examples of research on the impact of quality child development services: *The High Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40* by Lawrence Schwienhart, www.highscope.org; *The Children of the Cost, Quality and Outcomes Study Go to School*, Carollee Howes, et al, 1999; *Success in Early Intervention: The Chicago Child-Parent Centers*, Arthur Reynolds).
- d. **Closing the achievement gap:** "High quality, early education is critical to prepare children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. Research shows that high quality early education can particularly benefit low-income children and those most at risk of school failure by supporting their healthy development across a range of measures. Research demonstrates that it is the quality of a program that is most important to a young child's development. Indicators of quality that encourage conditions in which children are better able to learn and grow include low teacher-child ratios, small group sizes, qualified teaching staff, positive teacher-child interactions, parental involvement, and access to comprehensive services such as health care and mental health services", (*Reaching All Children? Understanding Early Care and Education Participation among Immigrant Families*, 2006, CLASP, www.clasp.org).
- e. **Quality of care:** "In other words, the data suggest that most child care settings in the United States provide care that is "fair" (between "poor" and "good"). Fewer than 10 percent of arrangements were rated as providing very high quality care. Eight percent were estimated to provide children with very low quality experiences", (National Institute of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, October 3, 2006).

6. Will all child care programs be required to participate in STEP?

No – **participation in STEP will be voluntary.** However, all child care programs with a history of substantial compliance with licensing and other regulations will be eligible to participate.

7. How is STEP different from State licensing?

Child care centers and family child care homes in Los Angeles County are licensed by the California Department of Social Services, Community Care Licensing Division (CCLD). As noted above, **the purpose of licensing is to ensure the health and safety** of children in out-of-home care. Licensing is not structured to assess the quality of the services provided. On-site monitoring of licensed child care centers and family child care homes currently occurs once every five years. Additional monitoring occurs if a complaint is filed with CCLD.

STEP builds on the health and safety regulations of CCLD and offers an incremental approach to improving child care quality. In addition to reviewing administrative materials, STEP incorporates scores from the Adult Involvement Scale, and the Family Child Care, Infant/Toddler, and/or Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales. These scores are determined based on observations of the program. The STEP rating would be renewed, including the on-site observations, every three years.

8. How is STEP different from existing accreditation programs?

NAEYC and NAFCC offer accreditation systems for child care centers and family child care homes respectively. These accreditation systems do focus on quality. However, only seven percent of child care centers and less than two percent of family child care homes in Los Angeles County are accredited.

Accreditation fees and the costs associated with ongoing compliance with accreditation standards serve as a barrier to participation for many child care providers. In addition, the gap between licensing regulations and accreditation standards is significant. STEP defines specific actions that programs can take to improve the quality of their services, and acknowledges progress at each step.

9. What does STEP offer that is new?

- a. Clear, concise information on the quality of individual child care settings serving children from infancy through preschool.
- b. A mechanism to distinguish programs that are meeting higher standards.
- c. Incentives for programs to pursue and maintain higher standards.
- d. A focus to local child care and development training activities.
- e. Real world experience on linking reimbursement rates to program quality.
- f. Benchmarks to assess the quality of care in individual programs and/or communities over time.

10. How will the STEP pilot demonstration project function?

Participation in STEP will be voluntary, including all programs (child care centers and family child care homes) with histories of compliance with licensing regulations. STEP standards are research-based or reflect best practices related to positive child outcomes. Technical assistance and support services will be coordinated and expanded to assist programs in meeting the STEP standards. In addition, STEP is aligned with licensing regulations, program standards related to various funding streams, and accreditation standards so as to minimize the administrative burdens of participating.

Separate instruments have been developed to rate child care centers and family child care homes. In general:

- a. STEP 1 is aligned with basic licensing standards.
- b. STEP 3 is largely aligned with Title 5 of the California Education Code which regulates programs funded by the California Department of Education (CDE) and with the 3-Star level of the LAUP quality rating system.
- c. STEP 5 is largely aligned with the 5-Star level of the LAUP quality rating system and the accreditation standards of the NAEYC and NAFCC. Child care providers participating in these initiatives will be able to utilize some LAUP and accreditation materials to document compliance with the quality rating system.

11. What will STEP measure?

For both child care centers and family child care homes, STEP focuses on six areas:

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| a. Regulatory Compliance | d. Identification and Inclusion of Children with Special Needs |
| b. Teacher/Child Relationship | e. Staff Qualifications and Working Conditions |
| c. Learning Environment | f. Family and Community Connections |

12. Where will STEP be implemented?

The goal of STEP is to recruit 50 percent of child care centers and 20 percent of family child care homes (210 child care centers and 400 family child care homes) within the following communities:

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| a. Inglewood | d. Pasadena | g. Florence/Firestone |
| b. Long Beach | e. Pomona | h. Pacoima/Arleta |
| c. Palmdale | f. Santa Monica | i. Wilmington |

These communities were identified because they have varying levels of child care infrastructure and include families of various incomes. In addition, the Healthy

Communities, Strong Families and Thriving Children Project will also be working in the Florence/Firestone, Pacoima/Arleta, and Wilmington areas.

13. Why is Los Angeles County concerned about the issue of child care quality?

- a. Children in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 are 15 times more likely to be abused, and over 44 times more likely to be neglected than those with annual incomes of \$30,000 or more, (*Executive Summary, Advancing Child Abuse and Neglect Protective Factors: The Role of Early Care and Education*, Sharon L. Kagen).
- b. Child care is a critical support service for the **Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) clients**; 26.3 percent of the DCFS caseload (as reported in August 2006) was under five years of age – 16.7 percent were under two years of age. Currently, DCFS is subsidizing just over \$15 million per year of child care services for DCFS families – yet we have no information on the quality of these services.
- c. Child care is a critical support service for the **Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) clients**; it is estimated that 41 percent of children receiving CalWORKs child care are under five years of age, and 11 percent are under two years of age. In 2005-2006, CalWORKs child care allocation for Stage 1 was \$104 million – serving an estimated 16,300 children. The allocation for Stages 2 and 3 was approximately \$138 million, serving an additional 20,000 children. We have no information on the quality of these services.

14. Who else is implementing child care quality rating systems?

Fourteen (14) states have implemented rating systems using a variety of mechanisms:

- a. Evaluations of the quality rating systems in Oklahoma and North Carolina have demonstrated improvements in child care quality.
- b. In Spring 2006, United Way of Orange County launched a rating system for child care centers. There are less than 800 centers in Orange County.

15. Where can I get additional information on STEP?

Additional information on STEP is available on the Office of Child Care Web site at www.childcare.lacounty.gov. We encourage you to frequent the Web site often, as we will be posting new training opportunities and program updates on a regular basis.

Helen Chavez will be joining the Office of Child Care in mid-August to coordinate STEP. After August 20, 2007, Helen will be available to respond to your questions; her direct line will be (213) 893-0505. Prior to that date, you can contact the Office of Child Care at (213) 974-4103.