

If We Care About Early Learning, We Cannot Ignore Teacher Well-Being

Abbie Lieberman [New America](#) |

After graduating from high school I took a summer job at a local child care center working with infants and toddlers. On weekday mornings I would wake up around 7:00 am after a full eight hours of sleep and drive myself ten minutes to work. By the time the center opened at 8:00 am I'd had my coffee, a good breakfast, and was ready to play peek-a-boo, sing songs, and calm crying babies. My biggest stressors that summer were learning how to change diapers and deciding how I would decorate my dorm room in the fall. I was making minimum wage, but for a temporary first job out of high school with no formal education or training, I was just looking to save a little extra cash before college started.

I soon learned that many of my colleagues were in a very different situation. On Friday mornings I always looked forward to working with Alejandra, a single mother in her mid-twenties. A slight woman, no more than five feet tall, she arrived at the center just in time for her 8:00 am shift after stocking shelves at Target all night. Because of her undocumented status, she wasn't able to get a driver's license. Public transportation is limited in this part of California, so she took multiple buses early in the morning and walked about one mile to get from one job to the next. It's no wonder that some mornings Alejandra would sit down to feed a baby and fall asleep in the rocking chair herself.

As we became friends that summer, I learned more about the stressors in her life. Neither of her part-time jobs offered health insurance, leaving her uninsured and constantly worried about getting sick. We were paid hourly and did not have any paid sick leave or vacation days. Alejandra often struggled to find affordable child care for her son, who stayed at friend's houses while she worked nights. Since she wouldn't be allowed back in the United States if she left, she hadn't seen her mother or any other family members in seven years and missed them very much. Alejandra loved working with children and put in her best effort at work, but I have no doubt that she was exhausted, stressed, and possibly depressed-- and rightfully so.

A stressed out workforce can be detrimental to productivity in any field, but it is especially relevant in early childhood education. The quality of relationships and interactions between the adults and children are key to high-quality early education and care programs. If the teachers are frequently switching jobs or are under a great deal of stress at work they will have more a difficult time providing children with the responses they need. High stress and unhappiness at work are also associated with high turnover, which means less stability for children. As explained in the National Academy of Medicine's seminal [Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation](#) report, "At the same time that socio-emotional well-being is so important for the quality of their professional practice, however, care and education professionals experience higher rates of stress than those in many other fields, and this is a primary reason why many people leave the field."

A 2012 survey of [Head Start staff](#) in Pennsylvania found that they had poorer physical and mental health compared to comparable women in other fields. One-quarter of survey respondents reported symptoms consistent with clinical depression. Poor physical and mental health is not only harmful for them, but also for the children they serve. And, when they are serving children from low-income families whose parents are facing the same kinds of stressors it can be even more concerning.

Low pay is a primary source of stress-- the wages for child care workers are simply too low. When I worked with Alejandra, minimum wage in the San Francisco Bay Area-- one of the most expensive areas in the country-- was \$8.00 per hour. It was difficult to find a sandwich on our lunch break that cost less than that. As a 17-year-old living with my parents, a few hundred dollars a month was just what I needed to have a little independence before heading to college. But it is far from a livable wage for someone pursuing a career in this field, as most people in the child care workforce are.

Early educators need livable compensation, including benefits, to make this a viable career path. Variations of Alejandra's story are very common. A 2012 survey [found](#) that less than half of the centers in North Carolina provided financial assistance for health care services. The 2012 [National Survey of Early Care and Education](#) found that more than 20 percent of child care workers reported that they did not have health insurance. Worrying about health insurance and sick leave can both contribute to employee stress. Like Alejandra, many teachers also make such low wages that they are forced to work multiple jobs, leaving them exhausted before a shift even begins. Coordinating schedules between jobs can be a source of stress too, especially with the various apps that have made it easier for employers to subject employees to [“just-in-time” scheduling](#) that is pervasive in low-wage work today.

Higher wages and better benefits are especially important given that some policymakers are increasing the education and training requirements to become an early childhood educator. Washington, D.C. has been [making headlines](#) over the last week for its recent requirement that all lead teachers in child care centers hold an associate's degree. The research on child development and learning makes clear that teachers and caregivers need specialized knowledge and skills to do their jobs. Transforming the Workforce's recommendation goes further than D.C.'s, stating that all lead teachers working with children from birth through age 8 need to have bachelor's degrees with specialized training in early childhood education.

If compensation does not increase, however, higher education requirements may only worsen the stress and well-being of the workforce. While higher education helps to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to do their job better, it can also drive them further into debt and exhaustion. Early childhood education needs to become a viable career path-- researchers understand now better than ever before how much of an impact teachers and caregivers have on children in these early years. Employees need affordable options for higher education that work with their diverse schedules and support from their employers to advance their education and training.

In addition to improving financial stability and conditions at work, Transforming the Workforce explains how program leaders can directly address emotional and physical well-being through “trainings that promote emotional awareness, socio-emotional competence, stress reduction, and reflective practices.” Certain stressors inside and outside of the workplace cannot be changed, but teachers and caregivers can change how they handle them. [Mindfulness training](#), for example, has been shown to reduce depression, increase self-regulation, and improve health.

Many child care providers throughout the country come to work each day like Alejandra did-- exhausted, worried about how to pay their bills, and stressed out about their jobs. These teachers have the incredibly complex and important job of caring for and teaching our nation's youngest children. It is more than a summer job or minimum wage job, and it is time for policymakers to treat it as such.

<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/edcentral/teacher-well-being/>