



Critical infrastructure

Supporting and strengthening informal child care

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Based on sector estimates, at least 34% of children 0-4 may be in informal care,^{2,3,4} with more infants and toddlers in informal care, and more 4-year-olds in preschool programs and licensed care. Knowing more about these situations is key to improving early childhood outcomes. While efforts to ensure quality in and access to licensed care are also critical, disregarding informal care excludes families and caregivers who are choosing this option. MDC is helping one North Carolina foundation, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, address this gap through their early childhood initiative, Great Expectations (GE). The vision of GE is for all children living in Forsyth County to enter kindergarten ready to learn and leave set for success in school and life; that commitment led the Trust to an exploration of family, friend, and neighbor care (FFN) in Forsyth County, where two-thirds of young children 0-5 are not enrolled in licensed child care. The Trust, MDC, and other community partners are working with families, early childhood educators, and community-based organizations to understand family, friend, and neighbor care and what parents and caregivers need to support the significant number of families and caregivers engaged in informal care in the county.

Defining informal care

Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care is child care provided by family members, friends, neighbors, or babysitters, and it is often defined by what it's not. It's not licensed child care, which is provided by teachers and child care workers in child care centers or family child care homes that are assigned a quality rating and follow regulations set by the state regarding child/staff ratios, safety and environmental standards, discipline practices, staff education and certification, and more.⁵ While FFN care is not licensed and regulated, it is a critical component of many families' support systems, and it is often used together with licensed child care. Many families rely on relatives, friends, and neighbors to care for their children while the parents work, attend school, or participate in other activities outside the home. FFN care is used by families of all races and ethnicities, of all income levels, and with children of all ages. FFN care arrangements vary widely with regard to frequency, duration, payment arrangements, and relationship between the caregiver and family using the care. FFN care is especially useful to families with nonstandard work schedules and nontraditional work hours, because it is difficult to find licensed care that accommodates these kinds of schedules. Like licensed care, FFN care also varies widely in quality, but we know much less about it because it's not regulated. Safety, trust, affordability,

² While it is difficult to get an official count of children in informal care, practitioners estimate by comparing the share of children 0-4 in paid care with the percentage of children under six whose parents are in the labor force. For example, in 2017 in the United States, 32 percent of children age 0-4 were in paid care,² but 66 percent of children under 6 were in households where all parents were in the workforce²; this suggests that more than 30 percent of young children may be in other care situations

³ <https://www.ced.org/assets/reports/childcareimpact/181104%20CCSE%20Report%20Jan30.pdf>

⁴ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/5057-children-under-age-6-with-all-available-parents-in-the-labor-force#detailed/1/any/false/37,871,870,573,869,36,868,867,133,38/any/11472,11473>

⁵ <https://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Services/Licensing/Child-Care-License-Overview>

convenience, and other factors lead many families to use FFN care and it is a valued option for child care in Forsyth County and across the country.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD ON A STRONG FOUNDATION

North Carolina has been a leader in expanding and improving licensed care. From Gov. Jim Hunt's investments in establishing Smart Start partnerships in the early 1990s to coordinate local early childhood education efforts, to Gov. Mike Easley's establishment of More at Four to provide high-quality pre-K to the children who need it most, to the state's early implementation of a child care quality rating and improvement system, and other programs like T.E.A.C.H. Scholarships and WAGE\$ focused on increasing education and compensation for early childhood educators, have all been models for the country about how to effectively support quality and increase access to early childhood education.⁶ Licensed and regulated child care programs are critical, but they may not meet the needs of all families when it comes to affordability, sick care, nontraditional work hours and nonstandard work schedules, and more. Most families, including families that use licensed and

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regulated child care, need to combine multiple child care arrangements to meet their needs. The lessons learned in strengthening North Carolina's licensed care system could be applied to the broader child care ecosystem, meeting families where they are and supporting the choices they are making. The large number of children in FFN care represent an untapped opportunity for reaching kindergarten readiness goals and understanding the strengths and needs of families of young children in North Carolina. We can look to other states that have been turning more attention to strengthening and supporting informal care—Colorado, Arizona, California, Maine, and Connecticut are among the states that have established approaches to supporting informal care, including promoting access to private credentials, building networks of caregivers to reduce isolation, and implementing training programs focused on increasing knowledge of child development and developmentally appropriate care.

These approaches go a long way to maximize the potential of informal care to support healthy child development.

Given the broad spectrum of care and quality, it is important to recognize the benefits of different settings, and support improvements where necessary. Input from families and caregivers about priorities for access and quality of child care in the *entire* child care ecosystem, with commitment

⁶ <https://iei.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Ponder-Early-Childhood-Ed-and-Smart-Start.pdf>

to strengthening the quality of care in informal and formal settings, can inform investments toward a supported and strong child care ecosystem that meets the needs of children and families.

Supporting family, friend, and neighbor care

As a part of our work for the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust’s early childhood initiative, Great Expectations, MDC completed a literature scan that reviewed current research on FFN supports and the types of effective resources for FFN care providers. There is a continuum of supports that can be offered, based on caregiver interest and community priorities. For example:

- Distribution of materials and equipment
- Group play and learning time
- Training programs, including professional development or a path to licensure
- Home visiting with caregivers
- Building social and peer learning networks
- Leadership and advocacy

Some strategies directly support caregivers and build on existing knowledge; others aim to reduce isolation among caregivers and lift their voices up in policy discussions. Wherever a community response falls, MDC research revealed the following key principles are important to consider:

Apply a holistic lens	Consider caregiver role	Work with trusted partners
<p>Resource providers should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider the range of needs: family support, child care, education • use culturally aware and adaptive language regarding FFN as an informed choice • bring a strengths-based perspective and check assumptions about FFN as unsafe or inferior care 	<p>Resource providers should seek to understand how caregivers view the context of their role, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationship with parent • compensation • education • professional interests • regulatory landscape • cultural expectations 	<p>Resource providers should take a relationship-centric approach, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cultivating leaders within informal networks • using recognized community-based organizations as intermediaries • embracing creative, non-traditional outreach strategies

FFN in Forsyth County

In the summer and fall of 2017, after identifying the lack of supports for informal care as a major gap in their early childhood ecosystem, the Trust commissioned a study of FFN care in Forsyth County, conducted by Compass Evaluation and Research. Compass surveyed more than 1,200 parents and more than 300 caregivers. Respondents commented on the nature and number of their care arrangements, the reason or reasons for using FFN care, strengths and challenges of FFN care, and breadth of activities and supports provided to children.

SURVEY FINDINGS

27,000
children ages birth to 5 in
Forsyth County

\$73,000 Estimated annual income
needed to afford full-time
child care in Forsyth County

70% Percent of Forsyth County
families that have an annual
income of less than \$75,000

3 The age of children
when challenges with
finding care peaked
among respondents

*Also the age when parents who have opted to keep
children at home may be exploring structured
arrangements for the first time*

Parents say they need:

- **Customizable care** — “just-in-time,” as needed, part-day/week
- **Help getting children ready for kindergarten**
- **Approaches and activities tailored to child needs and family cultural or religious values**

Survey respondents that were FFN caregivers expressed interest in supports like learning and skill growth related to child development, managing challenging behaviors, and ideas and materials for fun and educational activities. They also wanted relationships and connections with other caregivers, including informal connections to talk and share ideas, as well as a community where caregivers and children can play and learn together.

Adding to the Ecosystem

In 2018, Great Expectations partners assembled a design team of local stakeholders to review the Compass research findings and propose recommendations about possible investments in this space; MDC facilitated the design team. The team explored a number of implementation possibilities, two of which received funding from the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust in 2019. Grantees, other local partners, and statewide advocacy and education partners have joined a steering committee, facilitated by MDC, to oversee FFN efforts, with a focus on local coordination, statewide alignment, and learnings for the field.

PILOTS

The Trust has made two important investments in pilots, drawing on the recommendations of the steering committee. Work has already begun on two models of direct supports for FFN caregivers and the children they serve:

- *Home visiting:* Imprints Cares, a Forsyth County nonprofit focused on supporting families, is offering a home visiting program for English and Spanish speaking caregivers, using the Parents as Teachers for Caregivers curriculum. Home visitors work with caregivers to learn about their goals, where they want support, what skills they want to strengthen, and then provide information and support related to developmentally appropriate care. Caregivers also are invited to participate in group gatherings to make connections with other caregivers.
- *Play and learn groups:* Using Kindermusik and Kaleidoscope curricula, Child Care Resource Center and Latino Community Services are providing drop-in groups for caregivers and the children in their care to participate together. Some activities are child-directed and some are more structured, with modeling from parent educators. These are happening in English at a public housing community and in Spanish in a largely Latinx neighborhood.

These initiatives and their evaluation will help the Trust, MDC, and the broader community learn what works best to connect with and support FFN caregivers and the families using their care.

CONSIDERATION OF POLICY SHIFTS

The steering committee will facilitate ongoing coordination and shared learning between agencies involved in pilot implementation. Building relationships with families and their FFN caregivers during this pilot phase also will yield new insights for how to approach the question of policy shifts that may be required to fully support FFN caregivers and families, including the need to identify/increase sustainable funding sources for effective supports for FFN caregivers. Related to that is the likely need to raise awareness about FFN care and build a foundation for eventual advocacy to help change policy. The aim is to help community stakeholders at all levels better understand what FFN care is, what strong FFN care looks like, and what roles it plays in supporting healthy child development and family economic security. Changes in attitudes and policies to support FFN care may eventually be necessary to adequately support the large numbers of families relying on this part of the child care ecosystem. The steering committee will be considering all of the necessary elements of a more holistic child care ecosystem in Forsyth County, where licensed child care and FFN care are both supported, and where children have opportunities to thrive in all of the environments where they learn and grow.

About Great Expectations

An initiative of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, Great Expectations works to ensure that children in Forsyth County enter kindergarten ready to learn and leave set for success in school and life. Right now, almost half of the children entering school in Forsyth County are at risk of falling behind their peers in reading, and we believe this is unacceptable. Through building collaborative bridges among agencies, community members, business leaders, policymakers, and other funders—we are listening to parents to find out what they need and aligning efforts to ensure our children, and entire community, thrive.

About MDC

MDC brings together foundations, nonprofits, and leaders from government, business and the grassroots to illuminate data that highlight deeply rooted Southern challenges and help them find systemic, community solutions. Our approach, developed over 50 years, uses research, consensus-building, and programs that connect education, employment, and economic security to help communities foster prosperity by creating an “Infrastructure of Opportunity” — the aligned systems and supports that can boost everyone, particularly those who’ve been left behind, to higher rungs on the economic ladder.



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