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Child Care Needs of Farm Families

Kathy L. Reschke, PhD

ABSTRACT. One crucial strategy for preventing childhood agricultural injuries is to provide feasible, safe alternatives to on-farm parental care of young children. The on- and off-farm work demands of farming parents often compromise their ability to provide adequate supervision of their children on the farm, particularly during periods of intense production activities, creating a demand for alternative child care options. In order for child care options to be of value to farming families, they must be perceived by parents as trustworthy; available when parents need them; and financially feasible. The challenge of creating sufficient child care options for farm families will only be met when communities and business leaders address child care as a matter of community economic well-being as well as child and family well-being. Recommendations are given for engaging community and business leaders, crafting solutions that meet families' preferences and needs, and expanding available data on farm parents' and child care. A description of a model program and a list of recommended resources are also given.

KEYWORDS. Child care, child care options, child safety, rural child care

INTRODUCTION

One crucial strategy for preventing injury to children on farms is to provide feasible alternatives to parental care of young children off the farm.¹ Although parental care of young children may still be the desire of many rural families, it is not a realistic option for today's farmers and farmworkers for one simple reason—parents are not available to provide adequate supervision because they are working, both on and off the farm.

The Need for Alternative Child Care

Providing sufficient care, attention, and supervision for young children, especially those under age 3 years, is very demanding under any circumstances. Young children are curious and impulsive by nature and can become endangered

very quickly, even when a parent is nearby (Morrongiello et al., "Supervision of Children in Agricultural Settings: Implications for Injury Risk and Prevention"; this issue). Sufficient care and supervision of children by a parent in a farm environment is challenging at any time, but it is nearly impossible during periods of peak agricultural activity. Alternative child care, especially during these peak times, is essential for keeping children safe and well cared for. Hired and migrant farmworkers (30% of all farmworkers)² with young children share these same needs.

In addition to the demands of work on the farm, many farming parents are also unavailable at times to provide sufficient care for children because they are working elsewhere. The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service estimates that over 70% of household income for families operating

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farms in 2011 will come from off-farm earned income.³ In over 10% of working farm households in 2009, both the principle operator and spouse earned off-farm income.⁴ The more hours that parents are committing to work, the more likely they are to need an additional source of child care. Parents with off-farm employment located within a community may be more likely to seek out child care options in town. Whether this actually increases the number of available child care options for a particular family, however, depends upon many factors, such as the match between the child care program's hours of operation and the parents' work schedules.

Adequate child care within a local community is not only an issue of child safety and well-being, but also an economic issue for farming parents, the businesses that employ them off-farm, and the rural community that depends on their economic well-being. Solutions to inadequate child care will only be achieved when they are addressed as an employer and community need as well as an individual family need. It is vital, however, that the primary lens through which adequacy is viewed be that of parents' perspectives and preferences. The options a community offers must be perceived *by parents* as a better option than caring for children themselves.

Desired Characteristics of Alternative Care

Four characteristics have been identified in the literature as most important to parents when choosing alternative child care arrangements.⁵⁻¹⁵ It is critical that communities acknowledge these needs when crafting solutions, not only for farm families but for all local families who need child care.

Trustworthy

Families want to know that they can trust their child care provider to keep their child safe. In a recent national survey⁵ of 1000 parents, more parents identified safety as the most important factor in choosing child care than any other factor. Studies of rural mothers have found a recurrent theme of trust in their choice of child

care providers and skepticism that "strangers" could provide the love and care that familiar family members or friends could, particularly for infants and toddlers.^{6,7}

Accessible

One of the greatest challenges to providing any type of service to rural families is meeting the needs of a sparse population. The same is true for formal child care services. Rural communities rarely have the critical mass of consumer demand or the resources, such as trained staff, to sustain a child care program, particularly full-day, full-week, and/or extended-hour care.⁸ As with other rural services, transportation is also a challenge for families in accessing alternative child care.⁹

Available When Needed

Farm work and many off-farm, rural employment options are variable, unpredictable, and nontraditional in terms of work schedule. Farm families need child care that is flexible enough to meet the fluctuating need for alternative care. Rural mothers who have chosen relative providers frequently mention how much they value the providers' willingness to deliver care whenever it is needed, a service very few formal child care programs are willing or able to offer.⁶ As mentioned earlier, however, many families who need full-time care must rely on more than one arrangement to cover all of their child care needs. Piecing together a network of child care is challenging for any family, but it is even more daunting when choices are as limited as they are in rural areas.

Affordable

Affordable care is an increasing challenge for all families, regardless of geography or occupation. In a 2010 survey of child care consumers across the country, nearly 40% of parents reported that they were worse off financially than they were 4 years earlier.¹⁰ Three quarters identified affordable child care as one of the most, if not *the* most, important support for working families. Farm families have similar poverty rates as nonfarm families.¹¹ Even when both parents work off as well as on the

farm, 10% are at or below 100% of the federal poverty line.¹² Although child care subsidies are intended to meet this need, rural families tend to participate less in social service programs than do urban families,¹³ and the greater the distance from the social service agency, the less likely families are to obtain child care subsidies.¹⁴ Families that face the greatest challenge in paying for quality care are those whose income exceeds eligibility for child care subsidies, yet they do not earn enough to pay the full cost of needed child care. Many states are responding to budget shortfalls by lowering the eligibility cutoff for child care subsidies, thereby increasing the number of families who will have to shoulder the cost of care.¹⁰ Affordability is yet another reason that so many rural families turn to extended family, who are often willing to provide care for little or no cost, or in exchange for another needed resource or service.¹⁵ For additional characteristics of the child care options rural families choose, see Table 1. These environments, however, may be no better in terms of safety, supervision, or quality of care than care at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Engage agribusiness leaders, along with other business, social service, and community leaders, in collaboratively addressing the child care issues that are critical to the families on whom they depend.
 - a. *Frame child care in economic terms.*
A system of high-quality child care

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Rural Child Care

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- 82% of rural children younger than age 6 with employed mothers were in non-parental care on a weekly basis for an average of 30 hours per week.¹⁶
 - Rural mothers of young children are more likely than urban mothers to use extended family members, particularly grandmothers, as alternate caregivers.^{17,18}
 - Relatives are used as primary caregivers most often for infants and toddlers.¹⁸
 - As children reach ages 3 and 4, many parents enroll children in part-day preschool or Head Start programs.¹⁸
 - Over 40% of school-aged children (aged 5 to 14) with working mothers are also in nonparental arrangements for part of their day.¹⁸
 - 25% of rural employed mothers report using multiple arrangements to meet all of their child care needs.¹⁸
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options brings benefits not only to children and families, but to businesses and the community as a whole. Adequate, satisfactory child care in the community supports and provides employment.

- a. *Build on the strengths of rural communities.* When community leaders collaborate to identify services/programs that are complementary to child care with which they can integrate services and/or share limited resources, facilities, or materials, the community can more efficiently provide a range of family supports and increase the sustainability of each.
- b. *Promote multistream funding structures for child care programs.* Programs that rely on a range of public, private, local, state, and federal funding sources for the majority of their budget are able to offer high-quality care at a price that is affordable to the parents they serve.
2. Acknowledge parents' preferences for alternative caregivers who are familiar when crafting child care solutions.
 - a. *Provide information, resources, and supports to informal caregivers.* Many families will continue to choose relatives and friends as caregivers regardless of other options that are available. But family, friend, and neighbor caregivers are unique in many ways, requiring unique approaches to reach them with information, resources, and supports.
 - b. *Encourage child care centers to hire from within the farming or farmworker population.* This strategy is particularly effective when the child care program is intended to serve a population of working families, such as migrant farmworkers, whose culture, language, and/or religion is not reflected in the rest of the community. These families are much more likely to enroll in a program where caregivers share these characteristics.
3. Share information about evidence-based solutions that have increased the

availability of child care options to meet the needs and preferences of farming families.

a. *Share information about resources available to community and business leaders who identify child care as a critical issue:*

- Employers' Child Care Alliance (<http://www.ccrc-alabama.org/ECCA.html>; Lee County, AL): promoting quality by supporting accreditation, providing a school-age program, and providing information for parents about quality.
- Linking Economic Development and Child Care Research Project (<http://economicdevelopmentandchildcare.org/>): provides information and technical support to localities interested in using an economic development framework to build coalitions with the economic development community, business interests and policy makers to help craft new approaches to child care finance.

b. *Share information about innovative, responsive child care options, such as:*

- Rural Christian Migrant Association (Florida): Table 2.
- Durham Farm and Rural Family Resources (a region of Ontario, Canada): the mission is to reduce child injuries on farms via on-farm child care program, Early Learning Centres (<http://www.durhamfamilyresources.org/>).
- Rural Child Care Project (British Columbia): designed to meet seasonal farmworkers' needs by providing extended-hour (12-hour), short-term (summer) care near farms (<http://www.sdc.gc.ca/en/cs/sp/sdc/evaluation/sp-ah-150e/sp-ah146e/sp-ah146.pdf>).

c. *Share information about efforts to improve the quality of family, friend, and neighbor care:*

- Sparking connections: a multisite evaluation of community-based strategies to support family, friend

TABLE 2. Characteristics of a Model Child Care Program

<p>The Rural Christian Migrant Association (RCMA) serves farmworkers and their children in 21 rural Florida counties by offering care and education for over 8000 children aged 6 weeks to 12 years. RCMA is a model of responsive, sustainable support for farm families for many reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hours of operation of each center are determined by local need with parent input. • Additional services and supports for families are provided (e.g., transportation, English/literacy classes, interpretation, and parent education). • Staff members are recruited from local communities; many are former farmworkers and parents of children served by RCMA. • Program quality is highly valued and is pursued through program accreditation (approximately half of RCMA's 87 centers are nationally accredited) and educational attainment and professional development of staff. • The board of directors includes representatives from agribusiness and growers as well as other sectors of each region served. Former parents also serve on the board. • In order to be responsive to the changing needs of the farming community, strategic planning is conducted every three years and is based on a community needs assessment. • Funding is drawn from a variety of sources, including state and federal funding, agribusiness/corporate funding, and local foundation and individual giving. Only 2% of the budget comes from parent fees. <p>RCMA has sought to provide a safe, nurturing environment for the children of migrant and low-income farmworker parents for nearly 50 years. By maintaining their focus on meeting the needs of these families and staying connected to local communities, RCMA has created a sustainable, effective model of off-farm child care.</p>
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and neighbor caregivers of children; part 1: lessons learned and recommendations (<http://familiesandwork.org/site/research/reports/sparking.pdf>).

4. Collect data from parents who are farmers or farmworkers on the attitudes, preferences, perceptions, or options, and choices regarding the care of their young children. Conducting rigorous research with rural populations is expensive and tactically challenging, particularly when it involves collecting information from individual families. However, generalizing findings from other populations, even

rural samples, to farming families is not the best foundation upon which to build interventions or policy. As with service delivery in rural areas, a wise approach may be to collaborate with other research efforts addressing rural issues to maximize effort and resources.

NOTES

For an extensive review of research on child care issues in the United States, the following books are recommended:

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