

Voices for VI Children

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Judith Richardson, columnist

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Why do our daycare providers earn so little, when so much depends on them?

The *US Bureau of Labor Statistics* documents that wages paid to early-childhood educators are at the bottom of the scale, with only a few jobs earning less, including parking lot attendants and movie-theater ticket takers. Even gas station attendants and dog obedience trainers earn more than early-childhood educators. Yet research continues to support the fact that quality early-childhood education increases the chances for a child's success in later life.

Here in the USVI, almost half (48%) of our young children, birth to age five, attend a center-based childcare program. The caregivers and teachers in these programs are responsible each day for the development of our young children, but are paid less than a dog-obedience trainer. Something is wrong with this picture!

April, which opens with *Week of the Young Child*, is a good time to recognize a truth we should remember all year: If we want our children to succeed in school, we need to identify and support those early-childhood teachers who provide children's start on learning.

Decades of research show that the "daycare" years are, in fact, the most vital learning years of a child's life. This amazing period (about 2000 days) is when the "brain-architecture" of each child's receptive mind is being formed. The result is a solid (or fragile) framework for future learning. Indeed, by kindergarten, a child has *already* developed the basic learning abilities and patterns on which he or she will build – successfully or less so -- for their life.

To become good learners, what do children need in these critical first years? They need a safe and caring environment, providing age-appropriate experiences which challenge them and lead to successful accomplishments. They need to learn through play, to grasp language, and to develop a love for learning. Every child deserves this "strong-foundation" start to the rest of life.

The persons best able to provide this, are those caregivers who themselves have been educated in the field of earliest-learning needs and child development, and who caringly apply their knowledge and skills.

Meanwhile, the directors of childcare centers face three conflicting requirements in operating their centers. Their "trilemma" is: 1) to provide high-quality care (as listed above) for the children enrolled, 2) to pay their staff adequate, motivating wages, and 3) to keep their childcare center affordable for the families they serve.

Keeping a childcare center affordable is the single element that usually wins out. What happens next? Affordability too often forces a sacrifice of the two other requirements above: quality-care, and adequate staff salaries.

How important are good salaries to the quality of a childcare center? The fact is that *wages* capable of attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers, and these *educated caregivers* themselves, are the two most important factors distinguishing poor quality centers from high quality centers.

When directors try to keep costs down by paying low salaries, the results are a high turnover-rate of qualified staff, or worse yet, staff members who are poorly trained in early-childhood needs, and unmotivated to provide the high level of interaction that children need in order to develop and thrive as learners.

Children of low-income households *especially* need the intervention of high-quality early education to help them overcome poverty's disadvantages. Here in the USVI, almost one third of our child population (32.2%) is growing up in poverty, as reported by the *US Virgin Islands KIDS COUNT Data Book* in 2005.

Let's face it: high-quality childcare is expensive. Most families simply can't afford to pay the cost of quality without outside support (donations or subsidies). But if we believe what the research tells us, that high-quality early childhood programs in a community actually make a long-term difference for children, especially those from low-income households, then we know that a real investment in early-childhood education is critical to ensuring success in school and through adulthood.

*Federal and local government, the community, parents and the private sector must share in the responsibility to ensure our children get the strong start they need. We can invest now to enhance the training levels and resulting wages of our early childcare teachers, and enjoy the long-term savings: more stable, achieving children, more stable families and a safer community. Or we can do nothing and pay the price later, with further declines in numbers of 12th graders graduating high school, lowered productivity, and fewer adults effectively prepared for work and life. What would *you* choose if your voice could be heard?*

Voices for VI Children is looking for ways to strengthen the childcare community in the USVI. We invite you to join us (kholdsworth@cfvi.net).