

RESEARCH BRIEF



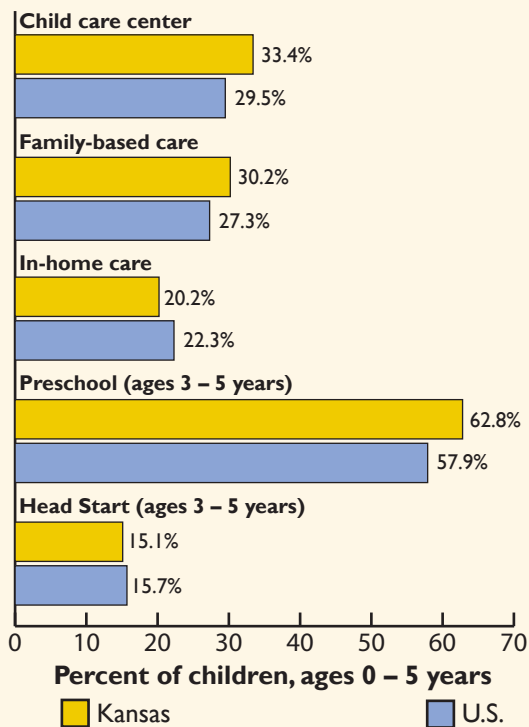
KANSAS
HEALTH
INSTITUTE

EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

National Survey of Children's Health finds most young children in Kansas are getting a positive start.

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Figure 1. Child care and preschool attendance



Source: 2003 National Survey of Children's Health

**More than
62 percent of
Kansas children
ages 3 to 5 years
attended preschool.**

The experiences and exposures that a child encounters during his or her early years set the stage for future health and development. A safe, nurturing and intellectually stimulating environment can contribute to a child's development of confidence, a desire to learn, social skills and future health and success.

Kansas parents provide nurturing home environments, but also unnecessary risks

The 2003 National Survey of Children's Health found most parents provided good nutrition for their infants and read to their young children. But parents also unnecessarily exposed their children to household risks, such as indoor tobacco smoke. Accidents and unintentional injuries were also common for Kansas children.

Infants receive good nutrition: Breast milk is widely recognized to be the ideal form of nutrition for infants. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants be exclusively fed breast milk for the first six months of life. In Kansas and across the nation, 72 percent of children ages 0 to 5 years had been breastfed. Thirty-eight percent of young Kansas children were breastfed for at least six months or were still breastfeeding when their parents were surveyed.

Parents read to children: Reading to children promotes the development of language skills and builds a strong foundation for future educational success. In Kansas, 94 percent of children ages 0 to 5 years had been read to at least once in the previous week; slightly less than one-half were read to every day. These rates were similar to those of children across the nation. However, parents of low-income and minority children were less likely to read to their children every day. Nearly one in five young Hispanic children had not read with their parents in the previous week.

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Children exposed to tobacco smoke: Exposure to environmental tobacco smoke poses a serious health hazard for children, as it is associated with higher rates of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), asthma, bronchitis and pneumonia in young children. In Kansas, 26 percent of children lived in households where someone smoked cigarettes, cigars or pipe tobacco.

Accidental injuries are common: Accidents and unintentional injuries are a leading cause of death among children ages one to four years. According to the survey, about 10 percent of Kansas children ages 0 to 5 years required medical attention because of accidental injuries; about 70 percent of those injuries occurred in the child's home. More than 2,400 Kansas children required medical assistance because of poisoning in the previous year.

Child care and preschools also provide important support to young children

High-quality child care arrangements are critical to a child's health, safety and development, as well as to the parents' peace of mind. More than half of Kansas children ages 0 to 5 years had been cared for by someone other than their parents during the previous month.

Preschool programs can help young children prepare for a successful transition into the school setting. In Kansas, nearly two-thirds of children ages 3 to 5 years had attended either preschool or Head Start programs for at least one week of the previous month.

Policy implications

While the overall experiences of young children in Kansas are positive, there are still significant opportunities for improvement. More than one-quarter of Kansas children ages 0 to 5 years had not been breastfed at all, about one-half were not read to on a daily basis, and about one in four lived in a household where someone smoked tobacco products. Policymakers can help assure that young children in Kansas receive the nurturing and care that they need to grow into healthy, productive adults by supporting policies and programs that provide education about good parenting practices and promote the availability of high-quality child care, health care and preschool programs.

The Kansas Health Institute is an independent, nonprofit health policy and research organization based in Topeka, Kansas. Established in 1995 with a multiyear grant from the Kansas Health Foundation, the Kansas Health Institute conducts research and policy analysis on issues that affect the health of Kansans.

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