

# Exploring Child Care in Denmark and the United States: Creating a Learning Community

*Presenters: Dr. Rebecca Isbell and Dr. Grethe Kragh-Müller*

ACEI: 2008

This is a very brief description of specific aspects of Child Care in the United States with the understanding that this is not a complete picture and does not explain all the diverse practices that occur in this country. (Isbell, 2008)

**Purpose of Child Care Programs:** There are many diverse types of programs with many different goals and missions in the US. But, most frequently, the mission is to provide a quality program for young children that will help each child reach their potential in the domains of cognition, physical, social, and emotional development. There is an overriding belief that young children develop holistically, and each area of development influences the others. Some programs and teachers may focus more on one of these domains of development than child care settings.

**Culture of the County:** The US has a diverse population with growing numbers of children that are Hispanic, African American, and immigrants from around the world. This diversity provides both strengths for the country and challenges for providing high-quality child care to ALL children. It is widely accepted that child care is a working parents' issue and the cost, quality, and selection is their responsibility.

**Needs of Families:** A growing number of parents with children under the age of six are working and returning to work soon after the birth of a child. This has increased the need for more and expanded programs that serve infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. It has also required that programs reevaluate the hours of operation so that parent's needs are met. The latest national calculations indicate that 6 out of 10 mothers, with children under five, are working.

The US has many children living in families where the income is at or below the poverty level. This means that families are unable to pay for quality programs and often must place their children in lower-cost custodial settings. These at-risk children need to be in high-quality programs where they can make the gains that are possible in these enriched environments with trained teachers.

Families in the US are growing increasingly aware of the importance of early childhood education and the impact it can have on the development of their child. However, sometimes they do not understand what developmentally-appropriate learning for young children is and mistakenly believe that pushing academics will make their children smarter.

**Funding of Child Care:** Most of the funding for child care in the US is paid by the parents of the children. This means that children from higher-income families are able to pay higher fees. Infant care is generally more expensive than toddler or preschool care, since the required adult-child ratio is so low. The national average for infant care is \$679 per month or around \$8,000 per year. The care for preschoolers can range from \$400 to \$1,000 per month or as much as \$4,000-\$10,000 per year. In 42 states, it costs more to send a four-year-old to child care than to attend the public state university (National Association of Child Care and Referral (NACCRRRA), 2008). This high cost restricts middle- and low-income families from being able to afford high-quality programs for their children.

Head start and some other government programs are offered for low-income families – but, these only serve a small portion of the children who need these services. Some local and state agencies provide supplements or vouchers to help low-income parents with the cost of child care.

Some states are moving into Universal or Volunteer Pre-K programs that serve four-year-olds before the kindergarten year. These programs are often designed to get children “ready” for school. They are usually state-funded through a lottery, or state income tax. This approach will add more options for parents of four-year-old children – but, it will not assist with the earlier years.

**Health and Safety Issues:** The US, individual states, and child care professionals are very concerned about health issues with children. The focus of national and state guidelines and rating scales focus on cleanliness and hand-washing. Teachers and children spend a great deal of time trying to follow these strict rules. Some environmental scales, state licensure, and some accreditation program focus more on health/safety issues than on the curriculum, activities, and relationships that are occurring in the programs.

**Independence of the Child:** It is the goal for most child care programs to help young children become more independent – capable of taking care of their needs, selecting activities, and thinking creatively. Of course, the interest in this area varies in the many types of early childhood programs in operation.

**Prepared Environment Indoors:** Most child care programs in the US are very interested in designing, setting up, and implementing an environment that will nurture the development of young children. In these prepared indoor environments, young children work in large groups, as well as having time to work individually on activities. There is also the wide use of Learning Centers, which range from traditional centers, such as blocks, library, and home living, to unique areas, such as grocery store, doctor’s office, and greenhouse. In group time, children participate in a teacher-directed activity, read or are told stories, sing songs, and participate in discussions with other children. In small group centers, children are able to select the area where they will work, participate in a theme related area, and cooperate with other children, as they play and interact with language. Teachers evaluate the children’s development during these times of activity and document what is happening by developing portfolios on each child that will include their documented learning and development.

**Outdoor Environment:** Much has been written about the need for quality outdoor spaces for young children in the US. Some programs have improved their playground areas and added more play opportunities. But, most are not well-developed nor do they provide sufficient time or materials for great outdoor play to occur. In addition, many parents do not want their children to go outdoors if the weather is cool, misting, or too hot.

**Teaching or Following Children:** In US programs, we see a combination of these two practices. Many programs include time when the teacher is guiding the learning in a structured way. Most programs also provide time during each day when children select an activity and participate in Learning Centers or projects that are of interest to them. Of course, the level of teacher involvement and the balance with individual interest varies from program to program. But, in most programs, both approaches can be observed.

## What can we gain from each other?

- Value of programs to the culture and families.
- Funding for all children to attend quality programs.
- Wonderful use of outdoor areas.
- Following the interest of the child.
- Planned indoor environment with large and small group activities.
- Interest in Literacy Development as part of the Whole Child Emphasis.

---

*All people must work together for  
the benefit of young children and their families.*