

DELAWARE VOICE

Day care is the first big step in education

BY ANN D. WICK

03/04/2006

Every day new parents are confronted with difficult choices when they look for out-of-home care for infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

This was brought home recently when a child care provider was sentenced to one year of home confinement because of the death of an infant last year. The mother placed her daughter in child care because she had to go back to work. By the end of the first day, her child had died.

Most child care programs licensed in Delaware provide safe care as defined by the existing state standards. But Delaware's child care licensing standards have not been updated since 1988. They are currently the oldest in the nation.

Revised standards for child care centers have been created, presented for public comment, and rewritten to reflect community opinion. They will be put into practice when they are approved.

These new licensing standards only apply to child care centers. Revised regulations for family providers have yet to be written. They also will be presented for public comment before they are enacted.

Improving licensing regulations is a necessary first step in building Delaware's quality early care and education system. During the past 20 years, research into brain development in the first five years of a child's life explains why high-quality care is crucial in preparing children for school and for life. Some researchers even say that the most critical development takes place in the first three years.

For example, the [University of Delaware Center for Disabilities Study](#) says that "you have about 1,000 days to build a baby's brain ... to create a reader, a communicator, a learner and a thinker."

The United States is just beginning to catch up with countries around the world that have placed significant importance on children from infancy through pre-kindergarten. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation launched a \$90 million, 10-year initiative to unite Washington state's public and private sectors in an effort to improve its child care system.

Nationally, the fewest dollars are spent from birth to age 5, when a child's brain is most receptive to positive experiences. This is a concern because in Delaware, 62 percent of children from birth to age 5 are in out-of-home care. Nationally, 65 percent of mothers with children from newborns to age 5, and 59 percent of mothers with children under age 1, are in the work force.

What the state and community does for families and children in the early years has a profound impact on Delaware's K-12 education system's success, our work force's capabilities, the prison system's expansion and ultimately this state's economic health. Let's consider a grand experiment by creating an education plan that includes quality early care and education for all children throughout the state.

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