

# Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS)

## *A Research-Policy Partnership*

## Quality in Nontraditional-Hour Child Care: A Research-to-Policy Brief

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### Background

Many families in the United States need child care outside of standard weekday hours. In fact, approximately 40% of young children in the country experience non-parental child care during some nontraditional hours (NTH), including early mornings, late evenings, overnights, and weekends.<sup>1</sup> Children who are experiencing poverty, living with a single parent, or who identify as Black are more likely to have a parent working a nontraditional-hour schedule<sup>2</sup> and are more likely to be cared for in a home-based child care (HBCC) arrangement during these hours (primarily informally by family members, friends, or neighbors).<sup>3</sup> Despite the prevalence of this type of child care arrangement, little is known about quality practices and environments during nontraditional hours that may contribute to positive child and family outcomes.

In light of recent federal guidance directing states to expand access to NTH child care, it is critical to better understand the dynamics of this type of care for children, families, and providers across different settings and times of day. This brief presents key

findings from a review of research on NTH child care, incorporating perspectives from literature about routines, rituals, and practices in families across racial, ethnic, and cultural communities.



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## Highlights

### 1 NTH Child Care Experiences are Varied and Valuable

NTH child care does not look the same across settings, times of day, or cultural communities. From bedtime routines to weekend activities and from centers to grandparents' homes, NTH child care arrangements offer a range of experiences for children, families and providers. Research indicates that families may use multiple different kinds of child care arrangements throughout each day and week, and that they also have different preferences for these different options. For example, children may engage in structured or adult-led learning activities in a center-based or family child care program during the weekday and may benefit from unhurried, unstructured time for relaxation and individualized attention during nighttime routines in a grandmother's home; or children who are primarily cared for by family members during the week may benefit from more formal care with similar- or mixed-age peers on the weekend.

### 2 Quality During NTH Care Extends Beyond the Norm

Research indicates that there are aspects of high-quality child care that are essential for children regardless of setting or time of day, most notably nurturing and responsive relationships and interactions. Yet, some aspects of NTH child care may look different depending on the time of day or week. For example, research suggests that families value and children may benefit from late evening and overnight child care settings that are homelike, individualized to children's schedules, and aligned with families' culturally affirming routines and rituals. Bedtime and overnight sleeping routines may be more different from standard-hour care routines than other types of NTH child care routines, such as breakfast, early evening play, or weekend field trips. Informal caregivers, who are most likely to provide NTH care, may benefit from access to public funding and trainings on CPR, safe

sleep practices, and healthy meals to deepen their practices. Formal sector child care providers may benefit from making their settings more homelike during NTH care, for example with soft lighting and comfortable spaces for children to relax and sleep, and by integrating family routines and traditions where possible.

### 3 Stable and Flexible NTH Arrangements are an Essential Family Support

Families who work NTHs often have little control over their work schedules, and their schedules tend to be unpredictable from one week to the next.<sup>4</sup> NTH care plays a critical role providing stability for children amid this instability. Several approaches can be taken to support families working NTH hours, including prioritizing the family, friend, and neighbor caregivers who are most able to absorb some of the unpredictability;<sup>5</sup> extending standard-hour programs in centers and family child care homes to be open during early mornings and into the evenings; and encouraging flexible practices such as accommodating changing work hours and providing individualized schedules for families who need them.

### 4 NTH Child Care Is Uniquely Positioned to Preserve Cultural Continuity

Particularly when NTH care is provided within a family's residential and cultural community, it can integrate families' rituals and traditions. Research suggests that personal care routines, transitions between sleeping and waking, and meal times offer important contexts for children's learning, identity development, and racial and cultural socialization. Respect for and recognition of cultural childrearing models may be particularly important for child care offered during hours when families may want care that is aligned with their home and family values (e.g., evenings, bedtimes, weekends). While providers with prior relationships may be best positioned to offer culturally affirming and consistent routines and rituals during NTH care, formal sector providers may need specialized

training on how to communicate with families about the traditions and routines that are important to them and their children and how to integrate these rituals into child care.

## 5 NTH Providers are Also NTH Workers

The sustainability of NTH care is dependent on providers' well-being. Healthy and equitable caregiving conditions are likely different in NTH child care settings than in standard-hour child care because of the different types of activities and routines required (e.g., staying awake during late

evening and overnight hours of care, supervising personal care routines around dental hygiene, bath time, and bedtime). Caregiving conditions may also vary across types of NTH child care settings; formal, paid providers may experience stressors related to hours worked, low compensation, and work-family balance, while informal, unpaid providers, such as unpaid relative caregivers, may experience stressors related to family relationships and role burdens within their own families. These different conditions may require different supports, based on the needs within the NTH caregiving community.

## Recommendations for Policy and Practice




There may be more than one set of policy solutions to increase access to high-quality NTH child care in all contexts. A multipronged approach should consider the values and scheduling needs of families, the developmental needs of children during different hours of the day and week, and the working and caregiving conditions of the full range of center- and home-based child care providers.

Additionally, different approaches and policies may be warranted, depending on the specific NTHs of care needed by families and the ages of children in care. For example, overnight child care solutions may look different from early morning or early evening care strategies. Evening care activities with toddlers will look different from activities with school-agers. The following recommendations aim to inform state and local program development and expansion of high-quality NTH child care programs and a thriving NTH child care workforce in the U.S.

### Recommendations for state and local child care subsidy agencies



- Incentivize existing licensed centers and family child care homes to extend child care services before and after standard operating hours, including incentivizing family child care homes to offer late evening and/or overnight care, by offering grants or higher reimbursements to cover additional costs such as rent, staffing, security measures, utilities, and equipment.
- Consider differentiated reimbursement structures and payment contracts for paid NTH child care providers that cover the full cost of offering NTH child care, including higher compensation for staff, staffing ratios that match the needs of providers, children, and families during NTHs, and equipment, utilities, and building maintenance costs.
- Allow families who receive a subsidy for daytime child care to also be eligible for a subsidy to cover NTH child care needs.

<p><b>Recommendations for state and local child care licensing and quality improvement agencies</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engage families and providers who offer NTH child care to participate in the design of NTH child care policies, procedures, and standards.</li> <li>• Identify promising approaches to regulation and quality assurance in NTH child care by collecting data from families and providers about what they prioritize, reviewing regulations and standards across states, and gathering information from licensing staff across states to understand the opportunities and challenges in supporting high-quality NTH child care.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendations for state and local professional development and support programs</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer differentiated support that recognizes different provider needs at different caregiving hours. For example, providers who offer child care during late evenings and overnights may require different supports from those for providers who offer child care on the weekends or during early mornings and evenings.</li> <li>• Facilitate partnerships between center-based programs and home-based child care programs to offer NTH child care (e.g., evening care) following standard-hour care; offer transportation between settings.</li> <li>• Offer relevant training and information on health and safety topics, including promotion of safe sleep practices, bath time routines, dental hygiene, and healthy meals.</li> <li>• Offer training and technical assistance on how to use daily routines and rituals to support children’s learning, identity development, and racial and cultural socialization.</li> <li>• Develop and offer support and training for nonrelative providers focused on honoring and respecting family cultural values and traditions.</li> <li>• Offer providers training and tools to facilitate positive and responsive communication with families around personal care routines, transitions, meal times, and other activities that occur during NTHs.</li> <li>• Develop training and information in the preferred languages of providers and families served.</li> <li>• Offer trainings at times of day that are accessible to providers.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Recommendations for new initiatives to support expansion of and access to high-quality NTH child care.</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invest in family child care networks that coordinate across a group of affiliated providers to increase available NTH child care for families.</li> <li>• Invest in on-call services for overnight and evening child care providers to offer care in the child’s home during NTHs (similar to a nanny service).</li> <li>• Consider developing incentive and compensation structures for informal family, friend, and neighbor caregivers who may not currently receive payment.</li> </ul>

## Methods

This brief is based on a literature review of nontraditional hour child care quality. The review used a two-phased approach: 1) an examination of peer-reviewed and grey literature describing quality and types of nontraditional hour child care settings in international contexts (i.e., U.S., Finland, Canada); 2) a focused review of culturally diverse research on family routines and rituals (i.e., safe sleep, interdependence) and settings (i.e., child development, family health and wellbeing) occurring during nontraditional hours (i.e., mealtime, bedtime, weekend), and working conditions in other nontraditional hour jobs. Our search was limited to the English language and utilized diverse databases and websites (i.e., Google Scholar, ProQuest, Sage Premier, PubMed). When available we also included research reviews and recommended articles from research advisors. A full summary of the literature review methodology along with search terms can be found in the full report.

## Endnotes

- 1 CCEEPRA Research Translation. (2023). *Understanding families' access to nontraditional hour child care and early education* (OPRE Report No. 2023-219). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/understanding-families-access-nontraditional-hour-child-care-and-early-education>
- 2 Lee, S. K., & Henly, J. R. (2024). *Nontraditional-hour child care in the United States: What is known about supply and demand*. University of Chicago. <https://www.erikson.edu/research/illinois-nontraditional-hour-child-care-study-inccs/>
- 3 Lou, C., Schilder, D., & Wagner, L. (2022). *Who uses nontraditional-hour child care?* (p. 4). Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/who-uses-nontraditional-hour-child-care>
- 4 Henly, J. R., Shaefer, H. L., & Waxman, R. E. (2006). Nonstandard work schedules: Employer- and employee-driven flexibility in retail jobs. *Social Service Review*, 80, 609–634. <https://doi.org/10.1086/508478>
- 5 Katras, M. J., Zuiker, V. S., & Bauer, J. W. (2004). Private safety net: Childcare resources from the perspective of rural low-income families. *Family Relations*, 53(2), 201–209. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3700263>

# About us

The Illinois Nontraditional-Hour Child Care Study (INCCS) is a collaborative research-policy partnership led by Erikson Institute in collaboration with the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, and Illinois Action for Children. The study addresses critical gaps in knowledge about what quality looks like in nontraditional-hour (NTH) child care; the experiences of families who search for and use NTH child care; the lived experiences of providers who offer care during these hours; and the types of supports needed to maintain, sustain, and grow the supply of NTH care. This research project will provide new knowledge to inform policy development aimed at building supply and increasing equitable access, enhancing quality, and sustaining a thriving NTH child care workforce. All products will be shared with our state partner, the Illinois Department of Human Services.

## Recommended Citation

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## Learn More

For the full report, please see: Bromer, J., Ragonese-Barnes, M., Miguel, J., Zhang, S., & Melvin, S. A. (2024). *Understanding quality in nontraditional-hour child care for children, families, and providers: A literature review and conceptual framework*. Erikson Institute.

This report is available to download at:  
<https://www.erikson.edu/inccs>.

For more information about this study, contact:  
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