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# Status of Child Care

## 2023 Report



# On the Brink of Collapse

## A Closer Look at a Failing Child Care System Through an Ecological Framework

Funding that has kept 220,000 child care programs operational nationwide during the Covid-19 pandemic has come to an end. The Child Care Stabilization grants that saved child care for more than 10 million children (about half the population of New York), made child care more affordable for 700,000 children (about half the population of Hawaii), increased the livable wage for more than 650,000 child care workers, and improved the child care subsidy system across the United States is over and child care is on the brink of collapsing (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, 2023)<sup>1</sup>. The cliffhanger is whether the child care system will survive. A system not just comprised of child care programs but a system inclusive of children, families, schools, and communities which are dependent on labor workers and successful gains in the economy. The Status of Child Care Report will focus the lens on the child care cliff by examining what it means for families to have access to affordable, quality care and how it effects the growth, development, and success of the child and the child care system using Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory System.

## Quality Child Care

When choosing child care, it is important for parents to choose a program with the highest quality of care. Research studies have found that children receiving high quality early childhood education are ready to enter school and are equipped with better math, language, and social skills. These children require less specialized services, matriculate further in their education, have fewer interaction with the justice system, and have higher earnings as adults (Barnett, 1995).

According to Child Care Services Association, there are several distinctive characteristics that are inherent in high-quality child-care programs: low teacher-child ratios, small group size, highly qualified staff and continuous education, experience and education of director, teacher retention, positive teacher-child interactions, accreditation, health and safety practices, and age-appropriate activities. While these key characteristics measure the conditions that foster a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment for children to thrive, a “good child care system” is affordable for parents and prosperous for the economy. Lisa Hamilton, president, and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation states, “without safe child care they can afford and get to, working parents face impossible choices, affecting not only their families but their employers as well.”







## Child Care in Alabama

The status of child care in Alabama hinges on multiple facets. According to the 2023 Kids Count Data Book published by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, 23 percent of Alabama's children live in poverty, which is higher than the national average, while 10 percent of children under the age of 6, from 2020-2021, lived in families in which someone quit, changed, or refused a job due to problems with child care. More often than not, the problem with child care is accessibility and affordability. In 2021, the average cost of center-based care for a toddler was \$7,501, which is 8 percent of the median income for a married couple and 30 percent for a single mother's income in Alabama. In 2023, a local center-based program in central Alabama reported the monthly tuition rate for a younger toddler as \$1,075, a yearly cost of over \$12,000, which is more than the average tuition cost to attend a four-year college or university in the state. With the impact of the pandemic making this an employee market, the cost of hiring infant child care in Birmingham, Alabama is approximately seven percent higher than Alabama's average base rate of \$14.71 per hour, yet seventeen percent lower than the national average of \$18.88. This simply means the average yearly salary for an infant care worker in Alabama should not fall below \$30,259.

Commencing in March 2021, Alabama's Department of Human Resources (DHR) issued Child Care Workforce Stabilization Grants utilizing the American Rescue Plan Act (ARP) funds to eligible child care programs, increasing quality child care accessibility and affordability for families searching for care, and especially those who work in child care, by maintaining a quality workforce. Programs were able to pay quarterly bonuses of \$3,000 to each full-time staff and \$1,500 to each part-time staff (Alabama DHR, 2023). For many child care workers, this boosted their average yearly salary closer to the national average.

# Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory System

A good child care system has numerous benefits for children, families, and society. How a child develops within the landscape of family, community and societal systems significantly impacts the child and family well-being in the short-term and across the lifespan (Guy-Evans, 2023). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is comprised of five environmental layered circles (systems) with the child at the center. These systems interact to shape the child as they grow into an adult. The closer the system is to the child, the greater the influence on the child's experiences.



The five ecological systems include:

- **Microsystem**: This is a child's immediate environment. These are significant others who have direct contact with the child such as parents, family, teachers, communities of worship, neighbors, etc.
- **Mesosystem**: The relationships between the groups from the first system (i.e. how the microsystems connect within their structures, such as parent-teacher, parent-work, etc.)
- **Exosystem**: Factors that affect an individual's life but, the elements of this system don't have a direct relationship with the individual.
- **Macrosystem**: Contains those cultural elements that affect the individual and everyone around them. These are things such as morals, values, laws, customs, and their influential presence in the other layers.
- **Chronosystem**: The stage of life that the individual is in regarding the situations they are going through. This system is relative to the timing of events in a child's life.



To better understand the scope of child development and education, let's examine "quality" child care through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory.



## The Microsystem

Bronfenbrenner refers to the child's immediate environment as the microsystem in the ecological model of human development. Important influences who have direct contact with the child (i.e., parents, teachers, school peers, communities) are crucial to fostering and supporting growth and development. While parents are their child's first teacher, in their quest to find high quality child care, they must consider the education level and on-going training of the teacher (and director), as well as how the teacher interacts with the child. Therefore, early education teachers need a strong knowledge base of how children grow and develop, and how to implement age-appropriate activities that will facilitate learning.

Alabama requires a minimum qualification of child care staff to be at least eighteen (18) years of age and have a high school diploma or GED and other additional requirements (Alabama DHR, 2021). The national qualifications of a lead teacher and teacher according to *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs*, Third Edition, includes being at least 21 years of age, a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, school-age care, child development, or other child-related field or an associate degree in early childhood education and currently working towards a bachelor's degree and other additional requirements.





## The Microsystem (*continued*)

Children have various needs according to their age and abilities and unique characteristics deserving of optimal knowledge, care, and teacher behavior that will have positive effects on children's outcomes. Alabama offers a variety of programs for teachers to advance their knowledge base, education qualifications, and salary. T.E.A.C.H Early Childhood Alabama is a scholarship program offered by Alabama Partnership for Children (APC). The program is a licensed program of the Child Care Services Association that is funded by Alabama's DHR and the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE). T.E.A.C.H is designed to increase the level of education of early learning professionals and their effectiveness in the classroom by making the educational process accessible and affordable thereby increasing their potential for higher wages and thus reducing staff turnover. The T.E.A.C.H program model offers three scholarships: CDA Assessment Fee, Associate Degree, and Bachelor Degree. Scholarships for the associate and bachelor's degree cover eighty percent of tuition and books, travel stipend, release time from work, and educational bonus and incentives.



# The Mesosystem

The second layer from the microsystem is the mesosystem. In the mesosystem, Bronfenbrenner examines how the microsystem interacts within its own structure (i.e., parent-teacher, parent-school, parent-work, etc.). The mesosystem is concerned with the connections of these relationships, and how well they work together for the well-being of the child. For example, parents and teachers should have consistent and continuous communication regarding home vs. center activities, behaviors, learning, health, likes and dislikes. For this connection to happen, teachers must build relationships with families, and families must become involved and engaged with the teacher and the program.

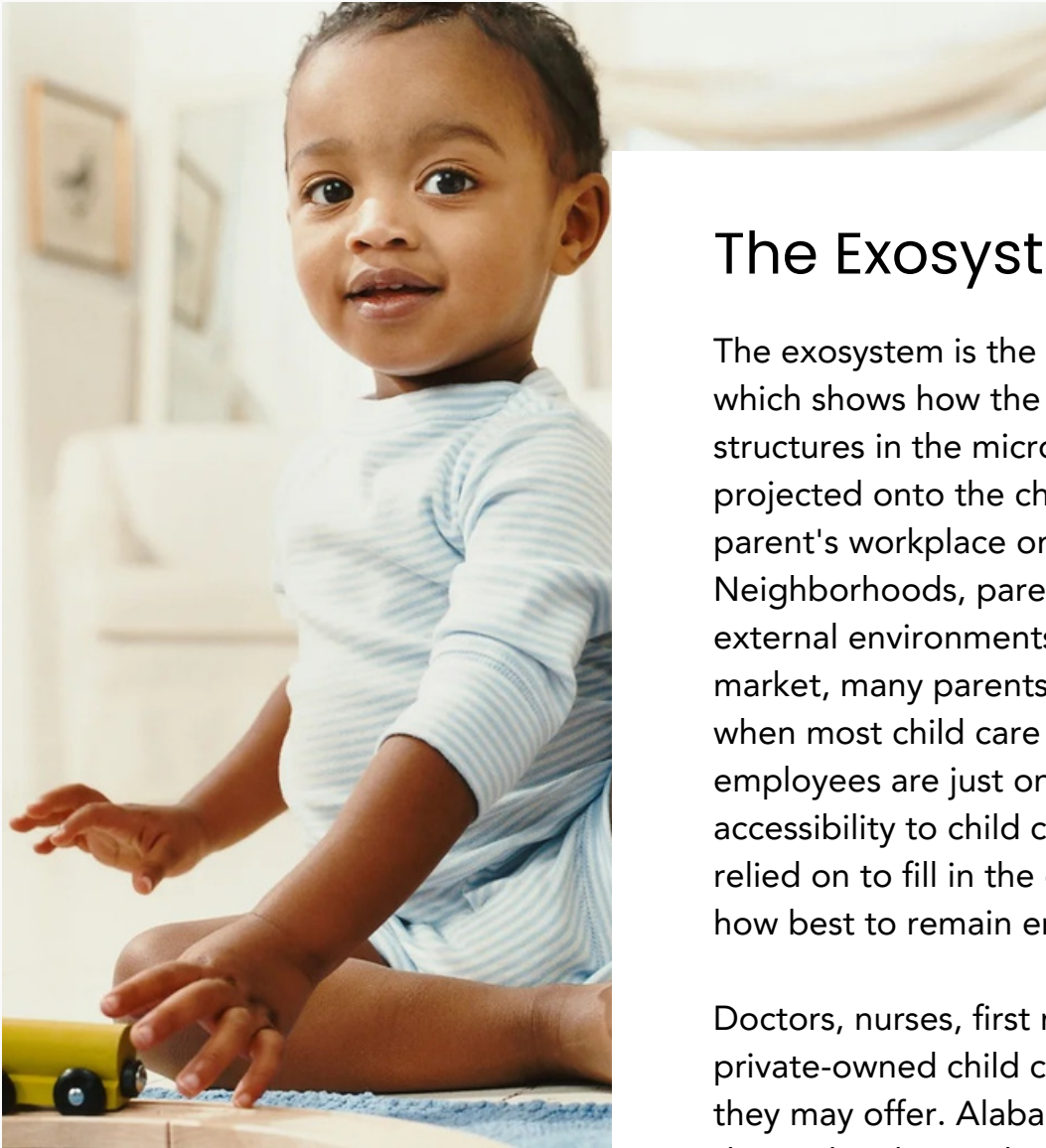
Parental involvement includes attending or volunteering at events or functions, having discussions about the child's day, activities to extend learning at home, and most importantly, reading to them daily. Being more involved creates a supportive learning environment at home and builds continuity between the two environments. Parental engagement, on the other hand, takes on quite a different connotation. Parental engagement can include being involved in decision-making, developing programming for parents that trains them in key areas, learning more about how the program operates and how they can better meet their child's needs, initiating parent "academies" that are conceived and operated by parents such as PTO, and parents envisioning the program as an institution that is a part of the larger community. "The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners." (Ferlazzo, 20114)



## The Mesosystem (*continued*)

Parents as Teachers is a “concept of partnering with parents to embrace their important role as their child’s first and most influential teacher” that was pioneered in Missouri in the early 1980s (Parents as Teachers, n.d.). Missouri educators became significantly attuned to how children entered kindergarten with varying levels of school readiness. Research indicated that a critical link between a child’s development of learning skills, including reading and writing, and greater parental involvement. Parent as Teachers is a global footprint with a program in Alabama funded by ADECE.



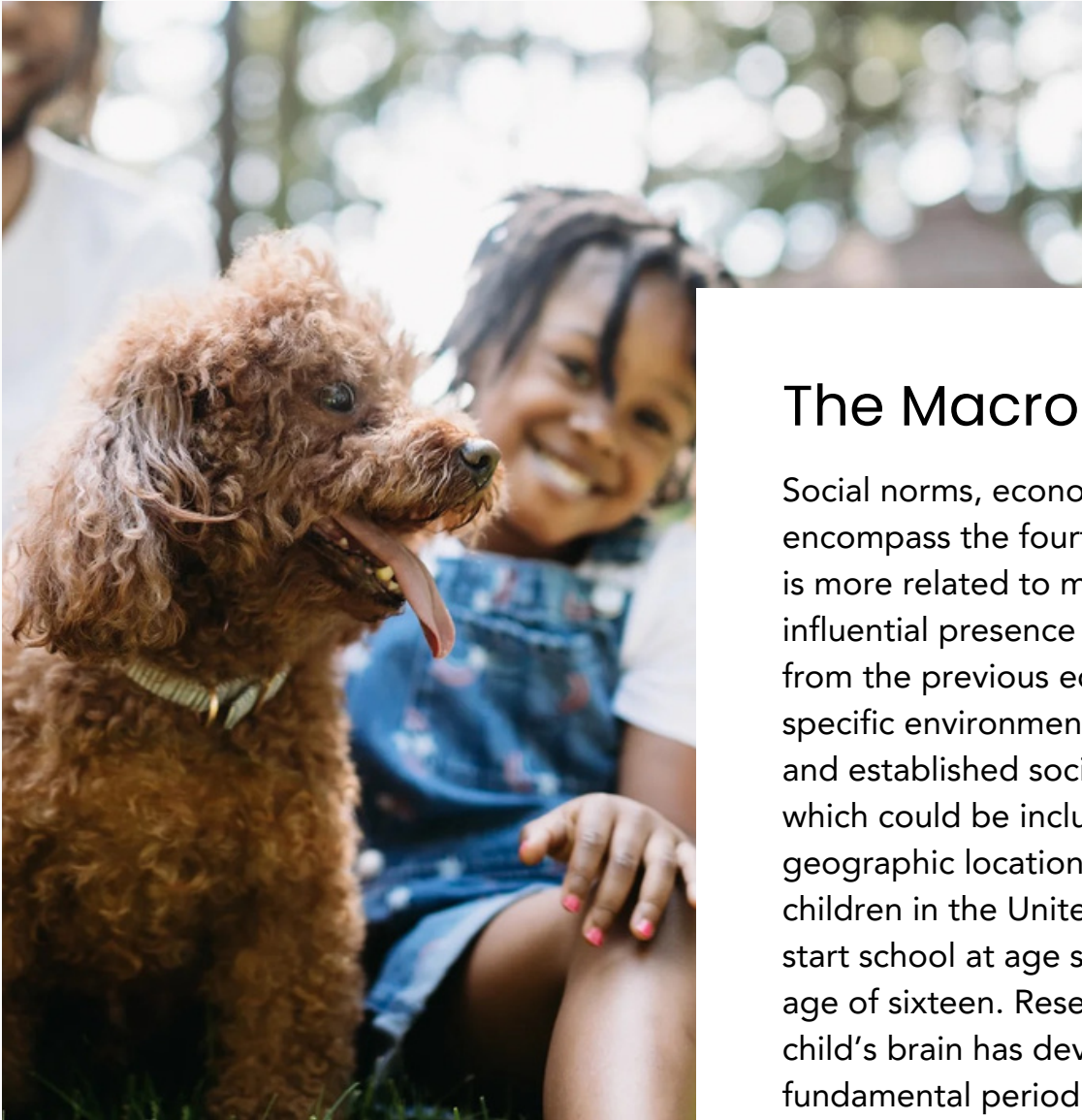


## The Exosystem

The exosystem is the third layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which shows how the social systems at this level indirectly connect to the structures in the microsystem. One example could be the emotions projected onto the child based on an incident that happened at the parent's workplace or factors that may compromise parenting. Neighborhoods, parental workplaces, friends, and mass media are all external environments, and the child is affected by them. In today's job market, many parents work non-traditional schedules that start or end when most child care programs open or close. Medical/healthcare employees are just one example of parents who face difficulties with accessibility to child care. Spouses, family members, or friends are often relied on to fill in the gap while other parents must make decisions of how best to remain employed or quit their job.

Doctors, nurses, first responders, and factory workers benefit from private-owned child care programs because of the non-traditional hours they may offer. Alabama's DHR accepts licensing applications to operate day and nighttime home and center-based care.





## The Macrosystem

Social norms, economic systems, political systems, and culture encompass the fourth layer, which is the macrosystem. This system is more related to morals, values, laws, and customs and their influential presence in the other layers. The macrosystem differs from the previous ecosystems because it does not refer to the specific environment of the developing child but rather the existing and established society and culture in which the child is developing, which could be inclusive of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, geographic location, and the ideologies of the culture. For example, children in the United States must go to school. Typically, children start school at age six and must remain enrolled until at least the age of sixteen. Research tells us that by age three, 85 percent of a child's brain has developed, which indicates birth to five as the fundamental period for laying a solid foundation for learning. High-quality learning environments are important for the cognitive, behavioral, and socio-emotional development of the child, charting the path for success in school, life, and the community.



## The Macrosystem (*continued*)

Professor Heckman, Henry Schultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and Nobel Memorial Prize winner in economics and expert in the economics of human development, and colleagues found a thirteen percent (13 percent) return on investment (ROI) for comprehensive, high-quality, birth to five early education which the research analyzed a variety of life outcomes including health, crime, income, IQ, schooling and the increase in a mother's income after returning to work due to child care. This ROI is much higher than the 7-10 percent ROI established for quality preschool programs serving three- to four-year-olds.

In April 2022, Alabama legislature approved an historic investment of \$40 million in quality pre-k and child care, which is part of the Fiscal Year 2023 Education Trust Fund. Of these funds, \$22.5 million was allocated to Alabama's First Class Pre-K program and a \$17.8 million investment in quality child care towards Alabama Quality Stars Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) program. Alabama Quality Stars offers coaching, support, and assessment to help child care programs improve and demonstrate quality along a one-to-five-star rating system. Participating child care providers will receive payments of up to \$80,000 a year, depending on their star level and licensed capacity.



# The Chronosystem

The fifth and final outer layer in Bronfenbrenner's model is the chronosystem. This system is relative to the timing of events in a child's life, all environmental changes influencing development over the lifetime including major life transitions and historical events. A typical transition is starting school; an atypical transition could be having to move to live with your grandparents. Historical events in Alabama influencing the development of children include the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic impacting learning loss and the closure of child care programs, the Alabama Literacy Act which states that all third grade students shall demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to the fourth grade beginning the 2023-2024 school year, and the end of the Child Care Workforce Stabilization Grants, which reinforced the child care industry by making it possible for child care providers to offer their employees a livable wage and keep their doors open so that families have a safe and nurturing environment to leave their children while at work.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is still being researched and outcomes are forthcoming as other events begin to manifest and unfold. However, involvement and engagement from all influences in the ecological system (families, schools, church, communities, societal, political, cultural) can detour any possible negative outcomes to positive gains for children not only in Alabama but across this great nation and for a lifetime.





# The Child, Child Care System, and Ecological Framework

The United States Department of Health and Human Services Office to the Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation identified 13 key indicators of quality in child care, which were developed from a comprehensive literature search conducted by the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care. Most of the key indicators have been identified as key surrogates of child care quality that have an impact on young children and are reliable when identifying high compliant versus low compliant child care programs.



The following 13 indicators paint the picture of the holistic care of children:

- Child Abuse
- Immunizations
- Staff Child Ratio and Group Size
- Staff (Directors) Qualifications
- Staff (Teachers) Qualifications
- Staff Training
- Supervision/Discipline
- Fire Drills
- Medication
- Emergency Plan/Contact
- Outdoor Playground
- Toxic Substances
- Handwashing/Diapering

Over the past 20 years, research has demonstrated that these indicators accomplish two things: (1) Prediction of compliance with state regulations, and (2) Meaningful relationship between compliance of these indicators and positive learning outcomes for young children.

Continuing with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, quality is viewed in accordance with how individuals affect and are affected by the physical, social, political, and cultural systems.



# The Child

The child is at the core of quality. Everything surrounding the core directly or indirectly impacts the child from birth to adulthood. The first five years of life are important due to rapid brain growth. Eighty five percent of a child's brain is developed by age three and ninety percent by age five. How well the brain develops depends on many factors including: genetics, proper nutrition starting during pregnancy, exposure to toxins or infections, and the child's experiences with other people and the world (Centers for Disease Control, February 2023).

Teachers should be knowledgeable of how children grow and develop and engage them with age-appropriate experiences that are significant to their rapid development:

- Environments that are safe inside and out
- Classrooms with small group sizes and teacher-child ratios
- Teachers who are trained and experienced in early childhood development
- Materials and equipment that is developmentally and age appropriate
- Inclusive environments that are respectful towards skills, abilities, ethnicities, and backgrounds
- Opportunities for children's success
- Environments that are engaging for children, families, and communities

For teachers with minimum qualifications of a high school diploma or GED, the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential is the first best step to educational advancement. The CDA is a national credentialing program by the Council for Professional Recognition offering professional development to early educators in a variety of settings with children birth to five: center-based, home care, family child care, and home visitor. In Alabama, Quality Enhancement Agencies (QEAs), like Childcare Resources, offer various early learning training sessions that meet CDA credentialing requirements. Additional offerings are available through two-year institutions such as Jefferson State Community College and Lawson State Community College, and there is an opportunity for high school students to jumpstart their early care and education career path through the Career and Technical Education (CTE) Program.



# The Child in the Microsystem

Connected to the child are the people and places that directly impact his/her life. The microsystem is the most critical because this level is where the most immediate influence happens. Parents, family members, teachers, schools, peers, religious affiliations, and communities are pivotal to how and what children learn, how they are loved and nurtured, and how the child treats others in return. These interactions are personal and fundamental for growth and development. Every day “powerful” interactions should become intentional, purposeful, and culturally responsive to increasing children’s learning and include the following three steps (Dombro et al, 2020):

- **Step One:** Being Present. Tune in to yourself and the moment.
- **Step Two:** Connect. Let the child know you are interested in what he/she is saying, doing, or thinking, that you desire to spend time with him/her, which cultivates trust and confidence.
- **Step Three:** Extend Learning. Your connection with the child should extend knowledge, skills, language, and vocabulary.

# The Child in the Mesosystem

Quality relationships are the result of positive interconnections in the microsystem. The mesosystem encompasses all the influential people and places cohesively working together for the good of the child. If parents (families) and teachers communicate well and have a good relationship, the result should have a positive effect on the child’s development. Communities, churches, and schools should all work collaboratively preparing young children for each stage of their life. Unfortunately, the opposite can be true if these relationships are harmful, abusive, violent, or dangerous. This system is reflective of the adage “it takes a village to raise a child.” The village is the entire ecosystem.

# The Child in the Exosystem

Although this level does not have a direct relationship with the child, the factors involved are just as effective. The social structures and authority of the exosystem do not involve the child but are external to their experiences and have just as much power to how they affect the child. Workplace benefits such as salary, PTO, health insurance, and work hours determines whether a family can afford child care, take personal leave for an ill child, can take the child to a health care provider for regular treatments, and if child care is available during work hours. From 2016 to 2020, three percent of Alabama's children were without health insurance, which is down from previous years. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy, more than \$8 billion (about \$25 per person in the US) dollars was estimated for FY 2023 appropriations in total discretionary funds for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Of those funds, \$140+ million was estimated for distribution for Alabama, an increase of \$33 million from 2022. While this may appear to be a significant dollar amount, compared to other developed countries, the United States invests very little in child care (Wong, 2023).

# The Child in the Macrosystem

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines quality as: a peculiar or inherent character (nature); an inherent feature (property); a degree of excellence (grade); social status (rank); a distinguishing attribute (characteristic).

The macrosystem leans towards our morals, values, and beliefs, which are pre-established by culture, status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity in which the child is developing. Regardless of our individual backgrounds, there is a commonality - we all want what is best for the safety and well-being of our children. We want them to be successful in school and in life and to live a life with greater opportunities and experiences. For our youngest learners, success begins as they are playing, exploring, discovering, learning, and wondering about the people, places, and things around them. Success begins with quality, affordable, and equitable child care. Forty-one percent of Americans report issues, such as, access to child care, which have forced them to turn down a new job offer. Angelica Maria, an advocate, and mother of five, stated "When I needed child care to put a roof over my children's head and food on the table, I have not been able to afford it nor find it." USA Today reports insufficient child care for children under three depletes the country of \$122 billion (about \$380 per person in the US) dollars each year in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue, which has doubled since 2018. According to Allyx Schiavone, a prominent early childhood education (ECE) advocate in Connecticut, says "the nation's economy rests on the shoulders of early education and teachers, and the system they are in is on the brinks of collapse."



# The Child in the Chronosystem

Changes that occur over the lifetime that influence development, including major life transitions and historical events exist in the chronosystem. The Covid-19 pandemic did not have any restrictions to its impact on an already fragile child care industry by exposing the demand for quality child care because during this time, “child care providers were the workforce behind the workforce of doctors, nurses, first responders, and other frontline workers.” (U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, 2023). Child care programs struggled to sustain themselves even while faced with increased costs to maintain the health and safety of children and staff and experiencing a substantial loss in revenue due to fewer families paying for child care. The United States ending the Child Care Workforce Stabilization Grants is nothing short of a new injury to an old sore of parents paying too much and not paying staff enough.

# Conclusion

According to USA Today (2023), “more than half of the country’s residents live in a child care desert.” According to the Center for American Progress, a child care desert is any census tract with more than 50 children under age five that contains either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots. In Alabama, 60 percent of all residents live in a child care desert, and the child care supply is low among certain populations:

- Hispanic/Latino: 64%
- Non-Hispanic, Black/African American: 49%
- Non-Hispanic, White: 64%
- Rural families: 66%

As parents desperately need child care, providers are struggling to hire and retain staff (Wong, 2023). The Covid-19 relief funds allowed states to take measures to ensure increased access to affordable, quality child care. The child care sector was granted funding to stabilize their programs, child care subsidies were expanded to more working families, reducing child care cost for families and improving compensation for the child care workforce.

Ignoring the child care crisis will only increase the capacity of what is already taking place since funding has come to a halt: child care workers leaving this profession and their passion for early learning and children to pursue employment in other industries for a higher livable wage will soon lead to the permanent closure of child care programs.

# What Can Members of The Ecosystem Do?

## **01 Parents/Families**

Parents and families can become more involved in their child's academic activities and more engaged in the education system at all levels. Strong connections between schools and families can also address other non-school variables such as health, safety, and affordable housing, which accounts for two-thirds of the variance in academic achievement (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023).

## **02 Child Care Programs**

In Alabama, take advantage of fully-funded and incentive-based programs such as First Class Pre-K, Early Head Start/Head Start, T.E.A.C.H and Alabama Quality Stars that will increase accessibility and affordability to child care, stabilize your business, and reduce staff turnover. Investment in early care and education includes continuous professional development not only for the growth and development of our youngest learners, but also for the financial operation and management of the business. Alabama needs more programs that offer nighttime care, which will meet the demand for child care of labor workers on third shift.

## **03 Teachers/Schools**

Build relationships. Ask families what days and times are convenient for them. Ask families what can be done to support their involvement. If transportation is a barrier, set up a ride share network; if child care is a barrier, have activities prepared for the children; if meal preparation is a barrier, serve dinner. If there is a window of opportunity for involvement from families, eliminate any barrier within reasonable guidelines. Partner with faith-based community groups, businesses, and other organizations to address the need holistically.



# What Can Members of The Ecosystem Do?

## **04 Policymakers**

Continue to make significant investments in quality child care for children birth to five. This investment is critical to their success in school and life, and for the community and economy. Continue to seek support at the federal level to continue to stabilize the child care system so that the projected 33,653 children (about twice the seating capacity of Madison Square Garden) in Alabama (and children across the United States) are not left without a safe, nurturing environment away from home to grow, learn, and develop.

## **05 Society**

It takes a village to create an equitable, accessible, and affordable child care system for all children. Take the pledge and be the village families need; be the village Alabama's children deserve.