

# GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105518](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

DOD operates the largest employer-sponsored child care program in the U.S., which it views as essential to overall mission readiness, retention, and recruitment for the military. The DOD child care program aims to provide quality, available, and affordable care for military families, and includes on-base options, as well as fee assistance for families who use community-based child care.

A report accompanying Senate bill 1790, which was amended and enacted as the fiscal year 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, includes a provision for GAO to examine the DOD child care program.

This report describes (1) how DOD child care supports the learning and development of young children, and how DOD seeks to ensure its quality; and (2) how the DOD child care program supports the readiness of service members and their families.

GAO searched for research on the effects of DOD's child care program on children and service members, and for general research to describe the effects of high-quality child care on children and employer-provided child care on employees. GAO reviewed DOD child care program administrative data for fiscal year 2021 (the most recent available) and pre-COVID-19 data from DOD surveys of service members (in 2018) and their spouses (in 2019), because of the disruptions COVID-19 caused to the child care industry. GAO also reviewed agency documentation and interviewed agency officials, representatives from military family associations, and other stakeholders.

View [GAO-23-105518](#). For more information, contact Kathryn A. Larin at (202) 512-7215 or [larink@gao.gov](mailto:larink@gao.gov).

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## MILITARY CHILD CARE

### DOD Efforts to Provide Affordable, Quality Care for Families

## What GAO Found

Little research exists detailing the effects of the Department of Defense (DOD) child care program on young children's learning and development outcomes. Broader child care research, however, suggests that quality child care is tied to positive outcomes for children, including improved cognitive, social, and language development. DOD has taken steps to create and maintain quality care, including by establishing programmatic and oversight requirements and developing new staff training. For example, while optional for most civilian centers, DOD requires its child development centers, school-age programs, and most community-based providers receiving DOD-subsidized fee assistance, to be nationally accredited. DOD has also recently implemented a new child care curriculum and research-informed online training program for staff at its child development centers.

### Children Playing at a Child Care Facility



Source: stock.adobe.com. | GAO-23-105518

Consistent with some research showing that employer-sponsored child care is associated with improved outcomes for workers, the DOD child care program aims to promote service member and family readiness by supporting job performance, improving retention, decreasing absenteeism, and promoting families' financial well-being. For example, DOD officials said its child care program supports service member job performance by meeting military-specific needs, such as those from frequent relocation, non-traditional working hours, and deployment. Officials also told GAO that DOD promotes military family financial well-being by subsidizing child care fees paid by families, and by making it possible for service members and their spouses to work. Pre-pandemic DOD surveys of military families showed general satisfaction with the quality of DOD child care. However, individuals from military family associations GAO interviewed said some families have expressed concerns about the affordability and availability of DOD child care. Concerns included long waitlists and the cost of care, especially for families of more junior service members. DOD officials told us the department is taking steps to address concerns, which include building more child development centers, expanding the pool of community-based providers that are potentially eligible to accept DOD-subsidized fee assistance, and increasing the amount of fee assistance available to families.