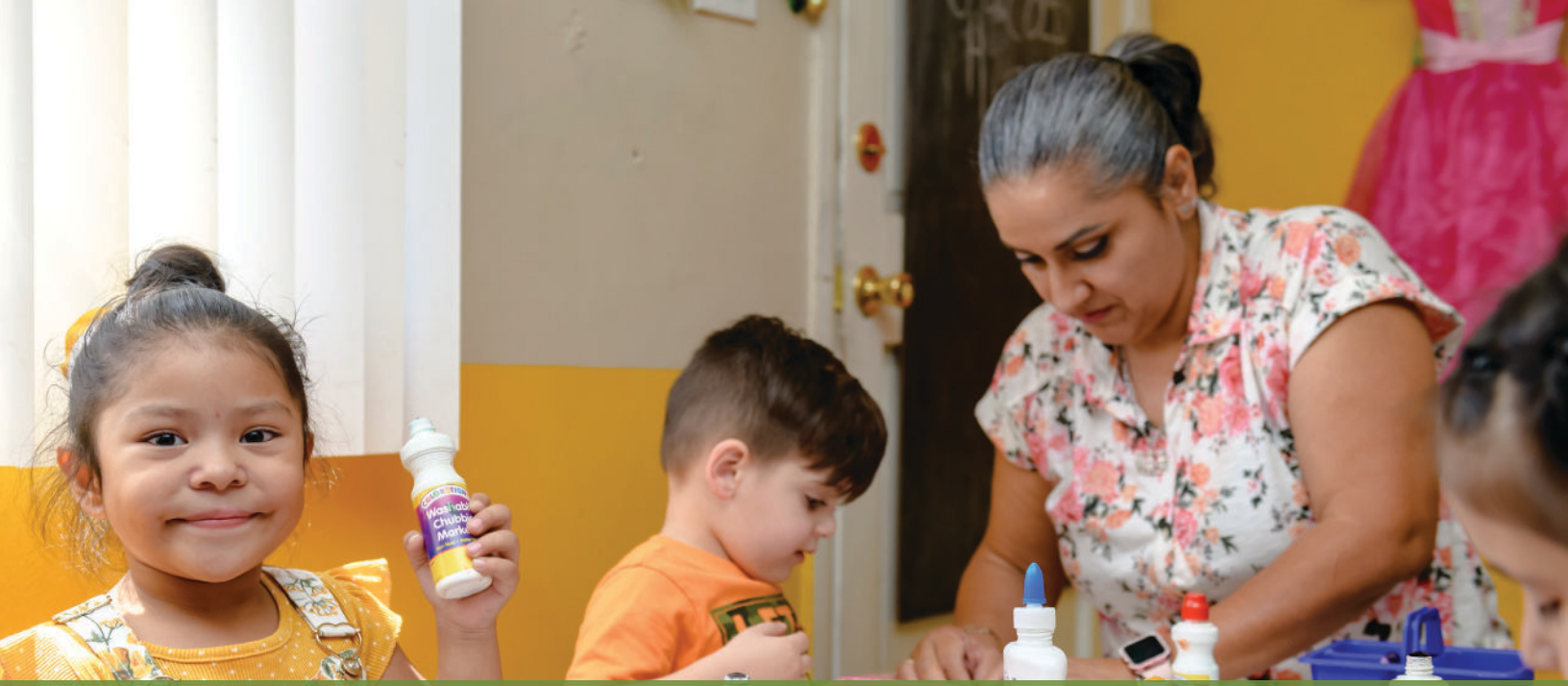


Home-Based Care and Child Development

Generations of Kids Get Their Smarts and Their Resilience in Home-Based Child Care

Like many moms to be, Lisa Kemper, a full-time manager for a mortgage insurance company, started fretting about childcare while she was still pregnant. By the time her son Cole was a few weeks old, as her maternity leave waned, she was getting a little bit desperate, and she didn't have a back-up plan. She didn't have parents or in-laws in close proximity. She didn't see herself as the stay-at-home mom her own mother had been. And she didn't have child care. "I had to get back in the workforce," she says now. "But I also couldn't imagine who would give my baby the kind of love and attention I could give him."

Lisa and her husband ramped up their search for the right caregiver. They interviewed two nannies and also visited an infant-pre-K center in a local school. Neither of those options felt right, she says. "The nannies just seemed inexperienced, and the center felt too clinical. Kids were moving around all the time and constantly working with different teachers. I couldn't imagine my baby thriving in that setting."

Then when Cole was about four weeks old, Lisa took a much needed morning off to get a pedicure and found herself sharing her child care quandary with the mom in the next chair. That's how she learned about a home-based child care program owned and run by **Benu Chhabra** right in her own California neighborhood.

Talking to Lisa, whose son Cole is now seventeen and brother to a younger sister who is 15, I remembered my own child-care dilemma. Ten years before Lisa was sitting in that pedicure chair asking another mom for childcare contacts, I had been anxiously begging my own neighbors in a small North Carolina town for answers to the same question: Who will take care of my child while I'm at work? Fortunately, for both Lisa and me, our neighbors had an answer: The woman down the street takes care of kids in her home.

Before that conversation, Lisa had never considered leaving her baby in a home-based child care. "It just wasn't something I'd heard much about," she says. "I always heard about centers or nannies. And I wanted my child to be in a place where I would know exactly what's going on and I was sure he would be totally safe and well cared for." I remembered that feeling too, the strum of two heart strings: One calling me to make sure my child is secure, loved, and learning

to eventually care for himself and others; the second insisting that I get back to my career and making the money I needed to raise my child. The tone of this two-stringed chord may change depending on your income, career aspirations, parenting values, and the breadth of your support system, but for most moms (and many dads too), the childcare dilemma is immediate and pressing.

Lisa took the advice of the woman she met at the salon to visit Benu, owner operator of Benu's Preschool, who now has been taking care of kids for 22 years. I followed up on a neighbor's tip to call Patty Lord, a 27-year family child care veteran. Lisa's kids are now teenagers thriving academically and socially in a California high school. My son is 24, midway through a PhD program in biochemistry. Meanwhile, the women who took care of our children from 0-5 while we were at work, and thousands more like them across the country, have raised a generation of children and are still providing security, love, and learning to their young charges. In fact, home-based child care is the most prevalent kind of child care for infants and toddlers, with 30 percent of children ages 0-3 attending home-based programs like these and more than **7 million kids ages 0-5** in home-based care.

Enrolling my children in a home-based childcare program "was the best decision I ever made," says Lisa, who still gathers with lots of other alums for Benu's summer barbeque. Benu "is everybody's mom," according to Lisa. She's raised dozens of children, become the surrogate aunt or grandma to their working parents, and is a mentor teacher for other home-based childcare providers in California. She's also a consultant for the early childhood program in a local college that sends students to her home for "lab hours," where they learn to apply the art and science of early childhood development they've gotten in the classroom. Over two decades, her daycare has become the heart of the neighborhood, a place where Lisa says, "children always know they are loved, where they learn all the skills they need for school, and they learn the social skills and self-regulation that they need for life."

From the perspective of the parents who attend her program, Benu rises to the status of superhero. (I remember observing with awe how my own superhero caregiver, Patty, could get four toddlers down for a nap at the same time without complaint and also have healthy, cookie-cutter shaped sandwiches ready for them to eat the minute they woke up. Now that's a superpower!) But superhero isn't what Benu, Patty, and other veteran home-based childcare providers call themselves. "We are early childhood educators," Benu says. "We are also business owners, mentors, and professionals." None of these terms alone can describe the full gamut of skills, wisdom, training, temperament, and entrepreneurial know-how that these women embody. But put them together and superhero comes close.

Indeed, decades after Lisa and I became converts to home-based childcare, researchers, psychologists, and early child development experts confirm what home-based providers have known all along: a high-quality home-based child care environment nurtures young children's social and emotional skills while also growing their brains. A smaller group size–typically 4-6 children—and one caregiver throughout the day and often over several years builds lasting relationships between child and caregiver. This continuity fosters children's sense of security and healthy interactions with others.

"What children need coming into the world is to be with a primary caregiver, or two, or three, including the parents," according to **Dr. Brenda Jones Harden,** Professor of Children and Families at the University of Maryland. "That security is the foundation for how you learn language, the foundation for whether you take a risk and solve a problem, the foundation for how you learn to self-regulate. The best place to get that is in a home environment, which could be the child's actual home, but can also be a home-based childcare environment or a child-care center that mimics the size and setup of a home."

Much of Harden's research on the developmental and mental health needs of young children, especially those whose families are low income, or encounter other barriers that create high stress in their family lives (like chronic illness, food insecurity, caring for other family members, or housing insecurity) has focused on Head Start programs in publicly funded child care centers. **But because the majority of low income and minority families send their children to home-based child care programs**—licensed child care homes, license-exempt homes, or family, friend, or neighbor caregivers— Harden began looking more closely at the quality of home-based programs and at the characteristics of the families and the providers in those programs.

Her research confirms what other studies have shown. "When the care is developmentally appropriate, **children realize significant lifetime gains** through better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors, and employment." An experienced and knowledgeable home-based provider meets young children's physical needs for good nutrition, sleep, movement, and safety, and also creates opportunities for learning through play, child-friendly routines, and culturally relevant experiences that strengthen children's competence and confidence. While parents might not use the terms "social-emotional wellbeing" or "cognitive development," they too recognize that home is where their child feels most secure and capable. Like Lisa Kemper and me, parents of all backgrounds and incomes look to home-based caregivers for the answer to that persistent question: Who will take care of my child while I'm at work? Happily, such parents discover that home-based caregivers provide not just reliable and affordable childcare, but also the nurturing and education that helps infants and toddlers thrive.

AGES AND STAGES: 0-2

What's Best for Baby? Home-Based Care Nurtures Infants' Sense of Security

What makes home-based child care the preferred option for many families is not just the intimate setting it provides for young children but also the way it addresses the specific developmental needs of infants and toddlers that are hard to meet in institutionalized settings. For babies and toddlers, that sense of safety and belonging is the bedrock of both physical and mental health.

According to Jones Harden, all young children need the triple treat of continuity, connection, and stimulation, but they need these ingredients packaged and delivered to fit their developmental age and stage—not served up in a one-size-fits-all "pre-K" package that focuses primarily on kindergarten readiness. This shift in perspective is important when we talk about **bolstering the child care infrastructure**—including home-based providers—with public funding, or **understanding why so many families choose home-based care over other options**.

Significantly, the key ingredient for infants' social and intellectual development is a secure attachment to a caregiver. "For babies, stimulation all has to be channeled through the caregiver/child relationship," notes Dr. Harden. "It's about carrying that infant in a snuggly or making eye contact with that baby or following the baby's lead and seeing what she's interested in or responding to a baby who's in distress. Those are the interactions that strengthen attachment and create the conditions for strong social and brain development." Those interactions are more frequent and consistent in a home setting with the same caregiver in attendance all day long, all week long, and often throughout a child's earliest years from infant to five.

The first thing Lisa Kemper noticed when she brought 4-week-old Cole to Benu's Preschool is that "the kids just all seemed to adore Benu because she would always talk to them and give them her full attention. Cole was a very social and flirty baby. Right away she made eye contact with him and he just fell in love."

At Harvard University's **Center on the Developing Child**, researchers characterize this healthy interaction between infants and their caregivers as **"serve and return"** —a series of volleys that builds a child's neural network and sparks critical connections that enable babies to keep learning and growing. "Infants develop up to one million new neural connections per second," according to a recent **evidence brief** from the Trust for Learning. Infants "serve" up

interactions through babbling, facial expressions, and gestures. Adults "return" by vocalizing, often in the high register we call "baby talk," and gesturing back at the child. This back-and-forth interaction is fundamental to the wiring of the brain, building essential pathways that support language, motor skills, memory, emotional regulation, and behavioral control.

In contrast, when adults pay little attention to infants and toddlers—often because they are distracted and stressed by their own life circumstances like the loss of a job, divorce, poverty, or health concerns—children's cognitive, linguistic, motor, and social-emotional skills may be **delayed**. Parents' adverse experiences, which often correlate to poverty, racial discrimination, or both, echo through the lives of their children, creating what child development experts call **ACEs**: adverse childhood experiences that are linked to chronic health problems, employment challenges, substance abuse, and mental health issues in adolescence and adulthood. Data show that **Black, Native American, and Latin-x children are at greater risk of multiple ACEs**. Research also shows ACES can be prevented, and that the best strategy for doing so is to **strengthen the economic and social systems that support families**, with reliable, quality childcare at the top of the list.

Serve-and-return interactions for infants and toddlers, between childcare providers and children, as well as between parents and their children, are like mental health vitamins. They fortify infants and toddlers for the ordinary challenges and disruptions that come their way in the first years of life and beyond. The home-based caregivers who ensure that the babies and toddlers in their care get their vitamins play an essential role in the long-term health of those children.

Back in that rural North Carolina county where my son grew up, Janelle Messer works for the county health department and in the past was responsible for evaluating the health and safety of childcare programs across her county. In that professional role, she witnessed the impact of serve and return interactions, or the absence of them, in a variety of settings. "The first thing I noticed when I visited Patty Lord's home-based childcare is that she was wearing one baby and playing with a couple of toddlers at the same time. I'd never seen baby-wearing in centers before, though it is such a good practice for caregivers and helps the infant feel safe and secure. Every child was getting

PATTY LORD RETURNS A "SERVE" FROM 2-YEAR-OLD ZAK. PHOTO CREDIT: ANNE VILEN

Patty's love and attention. It just seemed like a natural and nurturing place for a baby.

When Janelle got pregnant and had her son Siler, she initially arranged for her retired mother to care for him. But after a few months, when she needed more child care than her mom could provide, she remembered Patty in her living room with a baby on her back reading a story to a couple of toddlers. "I chose Ms. Patty's over larger programs with more children, caregivers, and indoor space," she says now, "because he connects with the same face and hands and heart every single day, just like he would if he were home with me. That's the security he needs, and the security I need to feel confident going to work."

The research on how serve-and-return interactions sustain healthy early child development is so strong that one organization that specializes in professional development and coaching for childcare providers has even created a technology to capture the "conversational turns" between caregivers and children. **LENA's** "talk pedometer," inserted into a child-friendly vest worn by the student, measures the types and frequency of conversations between the child and the caregiver throughout the day. The data is then captured in progress reports that **caregivers and child care coaches** can use to set goals and increase the frequency and quality of child/caregiver interactions.

The LENA strategy for increasing caregiver/child interactions affirms Dr. Harden's claim that for infants, quality care comes from close and continuous relationships. The comforts of a home-based setting with a single caretaker allow a baby to feel secure even while she is trying new skills—eating solid foods, crawling, saying oh oh when she drops the spoon. Each of those new activities builds brain cells and a pathway for further growth and development.

AGES AND STAGES: 2-3

Child Care Provides a "Home Base" for the Turbulent Twos

Mothers and experts are quick to point out that everything changes when your child turns two. Suddenly, your baby is mobile, talking, exploring, and testing boundaries—external boundaries like gates and electrical outlets, and also parent-imposed boundaries like wearing clothes, eating carrots, and not hitting your sister. "Testing boundaries means determining what happens when you cross the boundary," notes Dr. Harden. "Toddlers need to try things out and solve problems on their own as they learn what it means to be an autonomous human being, but they also need to check back in and know that there is a secure base, a person who loves them and supports them even when something surprising or scary happens. In home-based child care, there's one person who knows that child and who knows what stirs up their temper tantrums and also what settles them down—a steady anchor in the storm of being two."

For Kim Chase, owner of **Chase's Child Care Corner**, who's been taking care of kids for more than 27 years in her suburban Nebraska home, the turbulence of two really riled the waters in the early months of the Coronavirus pandemic. For the first six weeks after schools and child care centers and workplaces closed, she says, many of the families she served kept their toddlers home, even though her program remained open. "But once parents started working from home and parents who are teachers started teaching online, I got their kids back pretty quickly. They realized they couldn't get any work done when their toddlers were screaming and needing their attention!"

As a home-based provider with just eight kids in her care, Kim believes parents choose her program for the consistency of her care, the lifeline of nurturing relationships that she provides, especially to parents who may not have family or even close friends nearby to be their children's social and emotional support network. "During the pandemic, children were under

a lot of stress because their parents were under a lot of stress. Put the stress of the pandemic on top of the normal stress of just being two, and that child really needs a steady rudder, the continuity of care that a home-based provider can give," she says.

The stress of adjusting to new conditions, routines, and relationships challenges parents and their children, even without a global pandemic. Melissa Johnson, a marketing professional in Danville, California, encountered the terrible twos when her nanny, who had taken care of her son Liam for his first two years of life, moved away. Melissa enrolled Liam in a highly recommended child care center where toddlers moved from one classroom to another throughout the day to focus on different skills and topics. "I was pregnant with his younger brother at the time and Liam was potty training, so we were both struggling with transition stress," she says. "All the movement was just too much for him. He was crying and often unhappy. They couldn't give him the attention

he needed, and neither could I. It was obviously not working."

Then Melissa enrolled Liam in Benu's Preschool where he quickly began to thrive. Benu tailored her lessons to each child's interests and personalities. Soon Liam started to play with other kids. He learned how to better communicate his feelings both positive and negative because Benu took the time to listen, according to Melissa. "He began to understand that it was okay to feel big feelings as long as he expressed them in a manner that was safe for himself and others. Benu encourages her students to take a minute to feel their big feelings." Now Melissa's younger son Ethan also goes to Benu's house, and Melissa notes that even though he's a really different kid, he also just completely responds to Benu. "He loves her, and he feels like the work he is doing in her care is important, whether it's painting or playing outside or helping a friend."

For toddlers caught in between being babies and big kids, the push of getting along butts up against the pull of wanting to do everything by themselves. Consistent routines and structure mitigate that push and pull, providing a sense of control and ownership that enables kids like Liam to regulate their emotions and strengthen their skills in sharing and cooperating with other kids. "Benu taught the kids how to get along with each other and share and also how to speak up for themselves," says Melissa Johnson. "If he was acting up at circle time, she would have him do something physical so that his body could calm down, or she would have the kids run a race before they sat down to listen. She was able to redirect his energy and his focus so that he could focus on learning." Educators these days call skills like these "social-emotional skills." They include making friends, playing independently, taking a deep breath before reacting, solving conflict without getting physical, persisting at a task even when it is difficult. Many schools now both teach and assess students' **social-emotional development**.

Liam is now seven, a kindergarten graduate of pandemic remote learning, who met his classmates in person for the first time during first grade. First grade is always an intense year for academic skills like reading. For his cohort, it was also a first try at classroom routines they would have learned in kindergarten in a normal year, things like sitting at a desk and learning in a large group. Despite the extra challenges, Liam has thrived. "He just got his first semester report card," says Melissa. "What I'm most proud of, even though his academic marks were also great, is that he really excelled in his social and emotional skills. Those go back to what he learned in Benu's care: how to share, how to help, how to wait, and how to ask for what he needs."

As any parent knows, teaching two-year olds the nuances of self-advocacy and compromise is not for the faint of heart, but it's easier to do in the intimate setting of the home. "When you've got noise from a half dozen different rooms and lots of kids in the space and adults coming and going and you have to all parade down the hall to go to the bathroom at the same time," says Dr. Harden, "it's very hard to take a long pause and create space for self-soothing and empathy." But in a home-based setting, toddlers learn by interacting with just a few other kids of different ages and a caring, consistent adult. The guardrails for these interactions are mutual respect and consideration rather than institutional regulations where everyone does the same thing at the same time in a big group. Consequently, toddlers learn how to treat others with kindness and to expect others to do the same for them.

The notion that caregivers' respect for children as "little people" teaches them to treat others well has even been codified into a childcare philosophy called **RIE**. The childcare providers I talked to had never heard of RIE, but many of them practice it everyday as they teach, care for, and interact respectfully with other people's children.

Patty Lord, the 27-year caregiver in a farflung Appalachian community in Western North Carolina, for example, explains how she teaches toddlers to share. "Small children feel empowered when they know what to expect and how they can make things happen," she says. "I take the time to teach manners and sharing. Toddlers like the power of making someone else wait, so we talk about how long a turn is and when they need to give the toy to someone else. If we're going outside, I teach them how to put their hats and jackets on themselves. It takes time at first, but eventually they feel much more capable of taking care of themselves and even helping a friend."

These lessons, in the intimate setting of a home, are the foundation for toddlers to progress to being "big kids," who can do many things for themselves and are eager to learn, grow, and move on up to big kids' school.

AGES AND STAGES: 3-5

In Home-Based Care: Learning Looks Like Play and Friendship Looks Like Life

Could the parents of more than **7 million children**, including the majority of parents of color, who choose home-based child care for their kids know something that experts are only beginning to prove? Regardless of region, parents who choose a home-based program believe that the comforts of home, the same familiar caregiver their child has had since infancy, and a play-based approach to learning may actually be better for their preschooler than a scripted curriculum designed to prepare children for literacy tests they may encounter as early as kindergarten.

"It's so stressful to find the right place for your child," says Kim Chase, who has owned and operated Chase's Childcare Corner for 27 years. "Many of my parents are teachers. They see that their children, who I've taken care of since they were babies, are still happy and learning here when they are three. Why move them somewhere else? So I have the whole gamut from babies to 4 year olds, and they stay with me until they go to school."

Now early childhood experts are also giving renewed attention to a holistic approach that addresses young children's social as well as academic needs. Those needs can be met in a variety of childcare settings. Many private and publicly funded childcare centers, responding to the downward pressure of formal school curricula, place a heavy emphasis on whole-group lessons and learning activities that prepare children for Kindergarten—with a focus on fine and gross motor skills, recognizing letters, and basic number sense. "The expectations of kindergarten have really ramped up in recent years," explains Dr. Brenda Jones Harden. "Developmentally, this age group can tolerate a larger group, they have language, they have coping skills, and the data show that **kids in programs like Head Start are much more ready for the academic tasks of kindergarten than kids in home-based childcare."**

The comparison of center-based and home-based programs, however, may be a moot point. In both cases, what serves 3-5 year olds developmental needs are programs that foster their growing capacity to understand, explore and interact socially with the world beyond themselves and their primary caretaker. Many home-based child care providers, especially those with access to professional development on school-readiness, now incorporate formal literacy and numeracy lessons into their programs. Preschoolers learn to spell their own and their friends' names, they read everyday, and they practice fine and gross motor skills through arts and crafts projects and through play.

Increasingly home-based childcare providers are taking advantage of **comprehensive networks** that provide resources, coaching, coursework, and in some cases even access to group benefits for caregivers with home-based programs. Providers who deepen their understanding of child development and have access to resources that enable them to apply that knowledge in their own programs can offer the same kinds of lessons to preschoolers at home as do their counterparts in centers.

Minette Taylor, the owner of **G & T Daycare** in Philadelphia, is a shining example. After years of caring for 0-5s in her home, Minette signed up for courses offered through the **Teacher Education And Compensation Helps** program sponsored by State and administered by Pennsylvania Child Care Association. Over time, Taylor earned a degree in Early Childhood Education, became an expert in the Montessori instructional model, redesigned her entire childcare program to match the needs specifically of 3-5 year olds, and now offers the only Montessori home-based preschool program in Pennsylvania.

Children in Minnette's program thrive both in preschool and when they arrive at kindergarten. The small setting and the hands-on, play-based Montessori materials allow three-year-olds to learn through discovery and experimentation. "We don't call it play. We call it work," says Minnette. "And they are so proud of their work. I've got four-year-olds doing multiplication and almost everyone is reading by the time they leave me. This is a place where kids love to learn."

A recent publication from Vanderbilt University professor **Dale Farran** based on a decade-long study of nearly **3000 low-income three-and four-year-olds**

in Tennessee seems to support this play-based approach to early learning. The study shows that children who had attended a public pre-K program housed in public schools actually fared worse academically and behaviorally than those who didn't attend such academic programs. Grappling with this data, a surprising counter to research that shows dramatically positive **long-term effects of universal preschool**, Farren observes anecdotally that parents with higher incomes often opt instead for home-based programs that emphasize "play, art, movement, music, and nature." Children spend less time moving around the building or engaged in structured, rote learning. The flow of the day in an ordinary home also allows three-five-year-olds the benefits of interacting with younger children as well as focused time with their own age peers. When it's time to go outside, the big kids may help the younger children with buttons or tying shoes. Then while younger children are napping—they work on letters, numbers, and school-readiness skills.

At Patty's Lord's house, for example, children of all ages spend much of the day outside in the leafy yard engaged in imaginative play and exploration. They don't do a formal science lesson, but Patty follows children's natural curiosity and provides materials that allow them to experiment, learn, and explain. On a rainy day they walk along a short trail to a place where they can splash in puddles. Then they come back to the yard to read the thermometer and the rain gauge. "The younger children just like to dump the water out," she says, "but preschoolers have lots of questions. They can even explain how scientists use these instruments to measure the weather. They like to show off how much they know."

The way in which Patty follows the lead of the children in her care, responding to their discoveries rather than imposing her own reading of the world, exemplifies a theory of how kids learn promoted by researcher Alison Gopnik. "Having people around you who unconditionally **support your exploration** and give you the relevant kind of cultural information and grant you autonomy to go out into the world," according to Gopnik, "is actually the key to what human intelligence looks like." The combination of nurture and autonomy, imagination and adaptation, in short, play, creates the optimal environment for preschoolers to learn flexibly, innovate, and grow their brains.

Lisa Kemper, whose son Cole graduated from Benu's Preschool in California, points out that as a result, her kids actually still remember things they learned in preschool. "Benu had all kinds of little tricks for learning things like colors and shapes." What she really appreciates, though, is how the social skills her child learned in home-based care boosted Cole's transition to kindergarten. "Knowing that things are not always going to go their way and they have to figure out how to deal with it," she points out, is the mindset that really helps a child succeed in the larger group at school.

Those skills of self-soothing and collaboration, according to the Vanderbilt study, may help keep school-aged children out of the principal's office and moving forward with academic skills. At school, there are going to be rules that are externally enforced about not touching your neighbor, moving quietly down the hall, and waiting to go to the bathroom with the group. Social-emotional skills—like resilience, self-awareness, and considering another's perspective—help four- and five-year-olds circumvent behaviors that might otherwise result in frustration, acting out, or **disciplinary actions that disrupt the learning process**. As a result, children who are internally motivated to get along with others and feel

good about themselves will bump up against the rules less often and experience school as a place where they are fully prepared to learn.

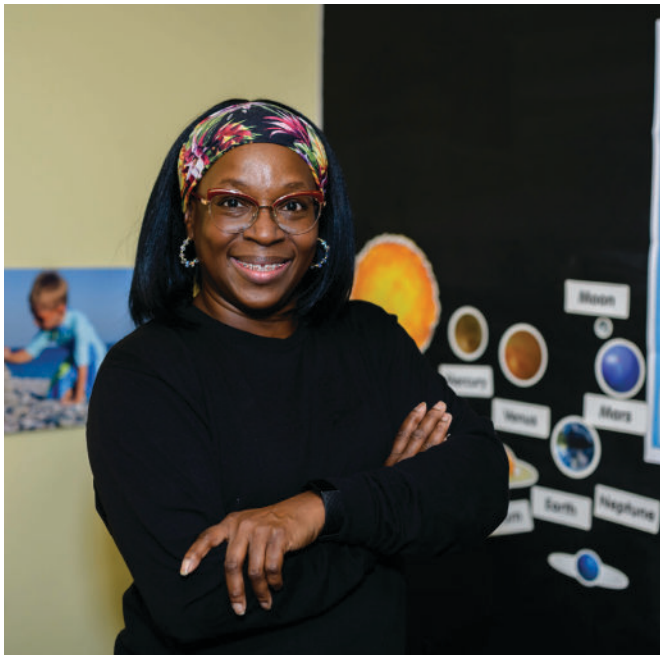
In home-based settings, informal play provides continual and creative learning opportunities. Play not only boosts children's **vocabulary, grammar, and language acquisition**, but also helps them develop **autonomy, self-reliance**, and empathy through healthy interactions with younger and same-age peers. Through **play**, according to Harvard Graduate School of Education's Project Zero, children learn to solve problems, test solutions, and explore ideas. They also learn to notice social cues, listen, compromise, and take another person's perspective. In other words, while children are strengthening and stretching their academic muscles, they are also developing the social skills that prepare a child for success in school and also in life.

AGES AND STAGES: 0–5

Parents and Providers Know When It Comes to Childcare, Love and Learning Begin at Home

Home-based care supports young children's development whatever their age or stage because it provides the sense of security and attachment that babies crave, optimal cognitive and social-emotional development in 2-year olds and important kindergarten readiness mindsets and skills for 3-5 year olds. Home-based caregivers with long experience, supplemented by coursework and training in child development, often keep children for the entire stretch from 0-5.

Pam Childress, owner of Just 4 Kids in Aurora Illinois, crafted her entire program—from furniture, books, and playground design to meal routines and lessons—to meet children's developmental needs. She teaches not only the children in her care, but, often, also their families and other home-based caregivers. When families have something difficult going on at home, she gives both moral support and tips for how to navigate stress that impacts their young children. "When their kids act out at my place, they get caught up in their own feelings and emotions that may have more to do with losing a pet or parents fighting or some other stressful situation at home. I do whatever I can to help the family, because when the family is happy, the kid is happier too."



Childress also has children in her care whose **single parents sometimes work nights**. For these children the routines of bedtime and breakfast provide a security net for them and their working moms that is an extension of home and family. "Ms. Pam is my son Jace's second mom," says Jenn Leary, who works nights at a hospital. That security and stability has been critical for my son's development both when he was in preschool and now when he goes to school and afterschool. I'm a survivor of domestic violence, so Jason's safety is really important. He knows he's always safe at Pam's, and that means I feel safer too. That makes it possible for him to learn and be happy wherever he is."

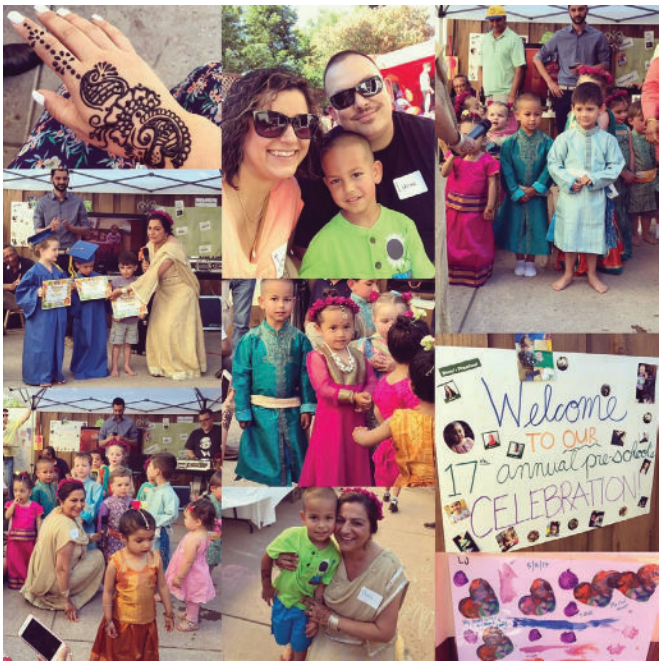
Many parents like Jenn don't have family—grandparents, aunts, uncless, or even spouses—living close at hand who can be the "village" it takes to raise a child. These parents often rely on and even rearrange their own lives and futures to keep their children, and themselves, under the wing of an experienced home-based caregiver. For parents whose children have special needs, the childcare provider can also be a hub for connecting with specialists or therapists who also serve their children.

Janelle Messer's son Siler began speech therapy when he was a toddler and newly arrived at Ms. Patty's House. Juggling speech therapy appointments, work, and navigating the services available to address and care for her son was especially stressful. But Patty was flexible in letting Siler come and go for speech appointments without an extra charge. She even reinforced the exercises Siler was doing in speech therapy by weaving the skills into informal activities like reading stories and singing. "It felt like we were a team," says Janelle. I knew she had his best interest at heart, and she had mine too."

The tight connection between parents and the home-based caregivers who teach their children weaves a secure net beneath kids that ensures their healthy development across the ages and stages of childhood. Children form lifelong connections with their friends from childcare and with the superheroes who take care of them. What's more, these parents find community, and life-long support in the village of working parents and kids surrounding their childcare provider. Parents make friends with other parents whose kids go to the same childcare. They look up to and lean on the provider who helped raise their children in those critical 0-5 years.

Over the years since my son graduated from Ms. Patty's, even since I moved away to a nearby city, I've run into other moms whose kids grew up under Patty's wing. We marvel at how she's still taking care of toddlers even as our own children are leaving the nest. We swap stories about the songs our kids still remember from childcare, the lessons they learned there about compassion and curiosity, and about how having reliable childcare right in the neighborhood saved our careers and our sanity.

In California, similar stories abound at Benu Chhabra's famous summer barbeque. Lisa Kemper, whose kids are teenagers now, has waited through the pandemic for Benu's tradition to start again. "It's a must attend



event for most families," she says. "We can't wait to taste whatever Benu's husband has cooked up for us this year, we swap stories about what our kids are up to now, and Benu asks them each about their grades, activities, what they are learning, and, for my kids, what colleges they are considering."

Parents whose children have long since graduated into big kids' school applaud the parents and children just moving up to kindergarten. Benu leads a graduation ceremony, including dancing in traditional Indian clothing and singing in Spanish. Afterward, while parents socialize, reconnect, and introduce themselves to parents whose children have just joined Benu's Preschool fold, they enjoy an extra helping of gratitude for having found a childcare home where their children got both love and learning—a second family to carry them safely and productively into school and life. "We know we wouldn't have survived those early years without Benu," says Lisa. "And we know our kids are better people and better students because of this place."