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Comparing public, private, and informal preschool programs in a national sample of low-income children.

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Summary: Recent research has found that center-based early education and care (EEC) programs promote gains in cognitive skills for low-income children, but knowledge is limited concerning diverse types of EEC arrangements. This paper contrasts the primary EEC arrangements (Head Start, public centers, private centers, and home care) attended by economically disadvantaged children in the US with data on 4250 low-income children from the nationally-representative ECLS-B cohort. Results found public centers and Head Start programs provided children with the most educated and highly trained teachers and with the most enriching learning activities and global quality, with private centers showing moderate levels and home EEC very low levels of quality. Nonetheless, after adjusting for differential selection into EEC through propensity score weighting, low-income children who attended private EEC centers showed the highest math, reading, and language skills at age 5, with children attending Head Start and public centers also showing heightened math and reading skills in comparison to children experiencing only parent care. No differences were found in children's behavioral skills at age five in relation to EEC type. Results support enhanced access to all center preschool programs for low-income children, and suggest the need for greater understanding of the processes through which EEC affects children's school readiness skills.

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