

Research on the Current Status and Optimization Paths of Childcare Services for Infants Aged 0-3: A Case Study of Four Communities in Chengdu

Chengxu Zhang

*School of Education and Psychology, Southwest University for Nationalities, Chengdu, China
2783325768@qq.com*

Abstract: Childcare services constitute a crucial component of infant care, and building a high-quality childcare service system has become a national priority in recent years, significantly benefiting people's livelihoods. Chengdu, Sichuan Province, has emphasized the development of childcare services as an essential part of creating an age-friendly and inclusive society, striving to resolve problems such as parents' reluctance, inconvenience, and hesitation to use childcare facilities. Through interviews, participatory observation, and policy literature review in four communities in Chengdu, this study investigates the current situation and identifies pathways for optimizing childcare services for infants aged 0-3. Suggestions are proposed from multiple perspectives and dimensions for different stakeholders to address identified issues. The study concludes that policy support, resource integration, and societal collaboration can effectively improve childcare service quality, contributing towards meeting people's realistic demands for high-quality and universally accessible childcare services.

Keywords: Infants aged 0-3, Childcare Services, Childcare Institutions, Early Childhood Education

1. Introduction: The Value Implications of Infant Childcare Services

Childcare services, also known as infant and toddler care services, refer to providing life care, nursing, and early education to infants and toddlers aged under three, fulfilling the social demand of families for infant care services. The Third Plenary Session of the 20th CPC Central Committee explicitly emphasized strengthening the universal childcare service system [1]. Currently, the responsibility of caring for infants no longer exclusively rests with grandparents, full-time mothers, or fathers; instead, it is increasingly provided by social childcare institutions. This development aligns with demographic trends and shifting family caregiving perceptions, holding significant societal value. At a micro-level, childcare services effectively reduce parenting stress within families, particularly dual-income households, allowing parents to balance their professional responsibilities and family lives better, thus facilitating household income growth. Childcare services provided by private organizations or communities significantly alleviate the conflict between women's work and childcare responsibilities, reducing career interruptions due to childcare duties. Consequently, women can dedicate more time to their professional roles, maintaining career continuity, enhancing female employment prospects, and improving their social status. Moreover, childcare institutions, staffed by professionals, offer

infants and toddlers high-quality caregiving and early education environments, which support their physical and mental development. Such environments encourage early socialization and pro-social behaviors, laying a robust foundation for children's future development and contributing significantly to raising the quality of the national population. From a macro-level perspective, childcare services, as integral components of social welfare, help create a more comprehensive and equitable public service system, enhancing social stability, happiness, and people's sense of well-being and satisfaction. It not only alleviates household childcare burdens, promotes female employment, and advances gender equality—thus increasing labor force participation rates—but also fosters coordinated development among related industries, driving sustainable economic growth. In recent years, as childcare services have become increasingly widespread, societal perceptions of childcare responsibilities have gradually transitioned from being seen as a family duty to a social responsibility. This shift facilitates further refinement of social welfare policies, advancing the development of childcare services.

2. Main Issues Facing Childcare Services for Infants Aged 0-3

2.1. Uneven Resource Distribution and Imbalanced Allocation of Childcare Institutions

There is a significant disparity in the distribution of childcare resources across different areas of Chengdu. Chengdu has a concentric-circle urban structure characterized as "one center, three rings," with notable economic and functional differences among these rings. Central districts, high-tech development zones, and economically advanced regions generally have abundant and high-quality childcare institutions, whereas remote areas or older residential communities lack adequate childcare resources. Taking Shuangliu District in Chengdu as an example, located in the southwestern part of the city far from the city center, historically it was primarily an agricultural zone with a higher proportion of farmer residents. Investigations found relatively few childcare institutions in this area, and publicly subsidized community childcare centers have only recently been developed. During visits to community childcare centers, community staff in Jiedaisi of Shuangliu district remarked: "Most residents here are farmers who, constrained by financial capability and traditional thinking, are reluctant to invest heavily in community childcare services, preferring instead to rely on grandparents or to care for children themselves." Field observations and interviews indicated childcare costs in Jiedaisi and Sisheng communities are significantly lower compared to central urban locations such as Maiya Childcare in Xinhong community and Hongmen community childcare centers. Residents' willingness to utilize childcare services remains low primarily due to limitations of economic development and household income. Moreover, the distribution of childcare institutions in Chengdu still needs improvement regarding population density and family demands.

2.2. Inadequate Market Regulation Leading to Variable Quality of Childcare Services

The comprehensive oversight of childcare institutions has not been integrated into administrative enforcement lists of relevant departments. Implementation details are insufficient, and the interdepartmental regulatory mechanisms remain incomplete with unclear penalty provisions, limiting the effectiveness of guidance and oversight of childcare institutions [2]. Childcare institutions currently operate under a registration-based system without prior approval required, leaving the approach to effective regulation still exploratory. Although regulations require childcare institutions to register with health authorities, a lack of binding measures for unregistered institutions has resulted in a national registration rate of only 42%, posing significant risks to the healthy development and quality assurance of the childcare sector [3]. In Chengdu specifically, childcare service quality varies significantly. Some facilities have inadequate infrastructure and equipment. The professionalism of teaching staff remains limited, with many obtaining qualifications merely through junior college or

self-examination programs, resulting in weak teaching capabilities and difficulty in providing high-quality childcare. Additionally, the degree of standardization and regulation of childcare services is relatively low, with incomplete regulatory frameworks and policies and a lack of unified quality assessment systems.

2.3. Prominent Contradictions in Resource Supply and Demand, with Insufficient Effective Childcare Provision

With the implementation of the two-child and three-child policies, family demands for childcare services have steadily increased, yet the existing supply remains insufficient to meet these demands, particularly for infants aged 0-3, resulting in a substantial gap between supply and demand. Influenced by industry development stages and pricing factors, the national childcare enrollment rate is currently only 7.86%, leaving significant gaps in available childcare slots. When some provinces set quotas for childcare slots per thousand residents, they focused mainly on feasibility rather than considering practical factors such as demographic distribution and family needs. This mismatch led to situations where needed institutions could not be established, while some existing ones remained unused, pointing to ineffective resource allocation [3]. Despite persistent efforts, Chengdu's community-based childcare services continue to face significant challenges, notably inadequate public childcare resources and a lack of diversification in the childcare system for children aged 0-3. A survey by the Sichuan Women's Federation covering over 5000 households in the province found that 60.7% decided against having more children because there was no one to care for them, and although 80% of children under age three were mainly cared for by grandparents, 67.2% of elderly caregivers reported health problems from childcare duties. Due to a shortage of public childcare institutions for infants aged 0-3, the enrollment rate was only 2.9%, reflecting severe supply-demand imbalance [4]. Currently, Chengdu has 1,609 childcare service institutions providing a total of 78,000 childcare slots, equating to 3.67 slots per thousand residents and an enrollment rate of 8.5%. While childcare services are gradually improving, private childcare providers dominate, with fewer inclusive public childcare institutions, maintaining persistent conflicts between market supply and community demand.

2.4. High Operating Costs and Limited Inclusivity and Public Welfare

Childcare institutions primarily rely on private entities renting commercial buildings, incurring high costs for rent, labor, renovation, and operation. Rent and personnel costs alone account for over 75% of total revenues. These institutions commonly face significant challenges such as substantial initial investment, high operational expenses, long investment recovery periods, and weak risk resilience. Additionally, around 70% of childcare institutions have experienced financial losses in recent years, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Supportive policies introduced by local governments have been limited in scale and coverage. Subsidies for construction and operations trialed in some regions have been short-term, necessitating ongoing observation of their effectiveness and sustainability [3]. During interviews with childcare centers in Chengdu's Hongmen community, it was found that inclusive community-based childcare centers have higher survival rates primarily due to community-provided low-cost land and strong community endorsement, leading residents to prefer neighborhood childcare centers. Consequently, these community institutions outperform private institutions in survival rate. By 2023, private institutions constituted 89.5% of China's childcare providers, charging an average monthly service fee (excluding meal expenses) of 1978 RMB per child, with first-tier cities exceeding 5500 RMB per month. These prices significantly surpass many families' affordability and expectations, discouraging potential users. Consequently, childcare service quality remains inconsistent, resulting in widespread reluctance and lack of trust among parents, simultaneously

presenting difficulties for families seeking childcare and childcare providers facing underutilization. In 2023, China's actual childcare slot usage rate was only 46.7% [3].

3. Specific Strategies for Improving the Quality of Childcare Services for Infants Aged 0-3

3.1. Strengthening Multi-Source Investment and Enhancing Childcare Service Supply Capacity

With market demand as the orientation and solving mismatches between supply and demand as the key objective, efforts should be concentrated on enhancing the childcare supply side, promoting effective integration of supply and demand. Efforts should accelerate the establishment of a childcare service system characterized by government leadership, market dominance, societal support, community reliance, and family foundations [2]. Local governments, considering local economic development levels and household consumption capacities, should adaptively increase fiscal support, creating dedicated childcare service funds to assist inclusive childcare institutions. Clear local standards for inclusive childcare fees and subsidy policies should be established, providing rent subsidies based on actual numbers of enrolled children, thus encouraging sustainable operations. Through public bidding and certification mechanisms, social capital should be encouraged to participate in childcare services, attracting enterprise and private investment via tax incentives and subsidies. Diversified financing models such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) should be explored to involve more social actors in building childcare facilities, ensuring effective implementation of inclusive childcare services. Simultaneously, effective collaborations should be forged among local governments, provincial financial departments, health commissions, and women's federations to offer childcare institutions subsidies for land rental, and utilities (water, electricity, gas, heating) charged at residential rates. Additionally, childcare vouchers for families should be distributed, thus promoting inclusive childcare services through multi-stakeholder collaboration.

3.2. Strengthening the Teaching Workforce and Enhancing the Professionalism of Childcare Services

Good teachers embody the hope of a nation. Since the 18th National Congress of the CPC, the CPC Central Committee, with General Secretary Xi Jinping at its core, has emphasized teacher workforce development, moral and ethical standards for teachers, and promoting societal respect for the teaching profession [5]. For the childcare sector, professional training should be strengthened to enhance childcare staff's skills in caregiving and education. Based on local childcare development, regional education departments should introduce specialized infant and toddler care programs across vocational education stages (secondary vocational, higher vocational, and applied undergraduate levels), as well as teacher-training universities. Relevant universities should be supported to offer continuing education in childcare services. Official standards including training outlines for childcare institution managers and staff, as well as codes of professional conduct, should be established. Additionally, professional textbooks for childcare education at secondary and higher vocational levels should be published to provide childcare teachers with practical skill-enhancement resources. Efforts should be made to develop a coordinated, integrated teacher training system involving normal universities, high-quality non-normal universities, and childcare institutions as practice bases. Moreover, establishing a certification system for childcare professionals is essential to regulate entry standards. The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security should introduce national occupational standards for childcare workers, infant caregivers, and infant development instructors, actively including these urgently needed professions into local vocational training guidelines, and fully implementing vocational training and skill assessment subsidies [3]. Furthermore, childcare teachers' salaries and welfare must be improved to enhance the profession's attractiveness and retain

talent. Local governments should organize childcare professional skill competitions with reward mechanisms, thereby enhancing teachers' competencies and professional confidence. Childcare institutions should establish clear career advancement mechanisms to encourage continuous professional growth and staff retention. Finally, promoting societal recognition and respect for childcare teachers can cultivate a supportive environment that respects education and educators.

3.3. Refining the Childcare Service System and Expanding Childcare Offerings

Localities should enrich childcare service systems across multiple dimensions and fields according to actual conditions. Kindergartens should be encouraged to extend their services downward, opening toddler classes and early childhood education programs. Cooperation between district health centers and early childhood enterprises to establish combined early childhood education and childcare facilities should be promoted, integrating childcare and early education to enhance resource availability. Community-embedded childcare services should be developed by utilizing idle community spaces such as party service centers, police stations, or vacant areas between buildings, constructing community childcare centers within a "15-minute convenient childcare service circle." Additionally, an integrated "medical-childcare" model should be explored [6], incorporating healthcare services into childcare practices. Strengthened guidance and staff training in nutrition, physical development, disease prevention, and daily care should be provided by local health authorities, who should also conduct regular on-site assessments of registered childcare institutions regarding hygiene, facilities, personnel, and health management systems, thereby ensuring childcare safety and scientific quality [3]. Regulations tailored to local conditions should be implemented for childcare institutions, alongside strengthened quality assessment and regular supervision. Special inspections for emergency management, fire safety, and production safety should be routinely conducted, accompanied by frequent and targeted safety education to ensure the standardization and safety of childcare services [3]. Municipal health authorities should establish comprehensive, interconnected childcare service information platforms accessible to urban and rural populations, providing free access to childcare institution information and scientific parenting guidance. Childcare institutions should also be encouraged and supported in adopting advanced information technology for management and service delivery, enhancing digitalization within the childcare sector [7].

3.4. Supporting Parents' Mental Well-being and Enhancing Home-School Communication

Effectively leveraging mutual-aid networks built by communities, resources should be integrated timely through various community channels, including bulletin boards, community WeChat groups, lectures, and online courses, to promote the benefits and importance of childcare services. Such efforts encourage parents to adjust their child-rearing perspectives positively towards socialized childcare services. Establishing effective communication channels between parents and childcare institutions helps build parental trust and bridges information gaps [6]. Childcare institutions should regularly communicate children's daily activities and progress to parents using multiple channels, including daily drop-off and pick-up interactions, parent-institution messaging groups, open days, and individual parent meetings. Strengthening the transparency of the childcare process with enhanced smart security features, such as real-time monitoring, facial recognition, alarm systems, and emergency communication equipment, while ensuring privacy protection, allows parents to monitor their children remotely through smartphone apps, reducing potential conflicts and increasing parental trust [8]. Childcare institutions are encouraged to offer trial childcare experiences, enabling parents to directly evaluate service quality. Hosting parent open days and parent-child events with community-wide participation raises institution profiles and attracts potential clients. Short-term,

half-day, or temporary childcare services offered during school holidays can also attract new families to experience childcare environments, gradually enhancing institutions' reputations and influence.

4. Conclusion

This study, through field research in four communities in Chengdu and analysis of relevant policy literature, deeply examines the current situation and optimization paths for childcare services targeting infants aged 0-3. The research reveals that childcare services significantly alleviate family caregiving burdens, promote female employment, and support the improvement of social welfare policies. However, current childcare services still face multiple challenges, such as uneven urban-rural resource distribution, inadequate market regulation, pronounced supply-demand conflicts, high operational costs, and limited inclusivity and public welfare provision. To address these issues, this study provides optimization recommendations for various stakeholders, including strengthening diverse funding sources, enhancing professionalization of childcare personnel, refining the childcare service system, and improving parental psychological support, thus promoting high-quality development of childcare services to meet people's practical needs for inclusive childcare.

Field visits and policy literature review in four communities in Chengdu identified distinct disparities in the distribution of childcare resources across different urban rings. Childcare institutions within the central ring (first ring) developed earlier, are more abundant, and have higher quality, whereas institutions in the second and third rings lag comparatively. Furthermore, inadequate market regulatory mechanisms have led to varying childcare service quality, dominance of private institutions, and insufficient supply of inclusive childcare centers. Additionally, high operating costs and limited public welfare provision make childcare services unaffordable for some families, significantly hindering the popularization and development of childcare services in Chengdu.

To resolve the above issues, this study proposes the following optimization strategies: Firstly, strengthen diversified investment guarantees and enhance childcare service supply capacity. Governments should increase fiscal support, establish specialized childcare service funds, encourage social capital participation, and explore diverse financing models to effectively implement inclusive childcare services. Secondly, strengthen teacher workforce development and raise the professional standards of childcare services. This can be achieved by enhancing professional training, establishing a certification system for childcare personnel, and improving salary and working conditions to enhance staff professionalism and career attractiveness. Thirdly, refine the childcare service system and expand the content of childcare offerings. Encourage kindergartens to extend downward and establish toddler classes, develop community-embedded childcare services, and explore integrated "medical-childcare" models to enhance the scientific basis and safety of childcare services. Finally, improve parental psychological support and facilitate communication between home and childcare institutions. Community education and outreach, parent open-days, and intelligent security measures should be implemented to build parental trust and promote wider adoption of childcare services.

In conclusion, by leveraging policy support, resource integration, and societal collaboration, the quality of childcare services can be significantly improved, relieving family caregiving burdens and promoting high-quality childcare development. In the future, strengthened cooperation among government, society, and families is necessary to refine childcare policies, optimize resource allocation, and improve the professionalization of childcare services. This will better fulfill people's demand for high-quality, inclusive childcare, laying a solid foundation for creating an age-friendly and inclusive society.

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