

## Military OneSource Podcast — 2023 Department of Defense Child Care Summit

### Children, Youth and Families Program

#### Episode transcript

##### Intro voiceover

Welcome to the Military OneSource Podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department, with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit [militaryonesource.mil](https://militaryonesource.mil).

##### Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast, I'm Bruce Moody. The availability of affordable, licensed, quality child care for military families is a critical component impacting quality of life, readiness and retention of those who serve our country. In response, Defense Department leadership convened a diverse group that represents the voices of families, child care employees and other DOD stakeholders. That's where we are today, at a child care summit hosted by the Defense Department. The department is using this forum for the exchange of information and ideas that will help address gaps and uncover solutions that benefit child care providers and parents.

Joining us on the podcast today are two individuals who spoke at the summit. With us today we have Susan Gale Perry. She is CEO of Child Care Aware® of America. And we also have with us Dr. Walter Gilliam, who is with the University of Nebraska, where he serves as executive director at the Buffet Early Childhood Institute. Welcome to the both of you. Glad to have you on the podcast.

##### Dr. Walter Gilliam:

It's an honor to be here.

##### Susan Gale Perry:

Great to be here. Thanks so much.

##### Bruce Moody:

Excellent. Dr. Gilliam, we're going to start with you. When you were at the podium, you walked our participants of today's summit through the science of early child education and how parents and caregivers play an absolute critical role. You began by saying that child care is an infrastructure. And if you would, explain to us what you meant by that.

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

Sure. Well, let me first start off by saying, a huge honor just to be here and to be among such wonderful, amazing people here at the Department of Defense who are just so deeply committed to military families. And that means those young children in those military families, and it also means those who care for those children. And it was just wonderful and amazing to be able to see all of this passion to care for those who care.

So in terms of what I was talking about as infrastructure, there were two things that many Americans needed to get to work. They needed a road, and they needed somebody to take care of their children. And both of those are infrastructures. An infrastructure basically is something that everybody needs, but that the individual probably can't afford. And so as a result, we collectively invest in it. And in my mind, child care is definitely an infrastructure. It's something that we all need in order for economies to be able to thrive and for the Department of Defense to be able to do its important work keeping us all safe. But it's something that individual families would not be able to afford individually, and so we collectively need to find a way to support it.

**Bruce Moody:**

And relating to that, you refer to the four legs of child care. Can you walk us through that?

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

Sure. When we think about child care, we think about its benefits to the children. If we do this at an appropriate level of quality, then children benefit immensely from the educational stimulation. But it's also important, secondly, for families in order for them to be able to go to work. And it's important also for employers, whether those employers are private businesses or the Department of Defense. And finally, it's also important because in and of itself, it is a workforce. Before the pandemic, 1.1 million Americans claimed early care and education as their employment.

And so when we think about the four legs of early care and education, it's important for us to remember that it's about the children, it's about the parents and the families who rely on it for child care, it's about the employers, but it's also about those who provide the care themselves.

**Bruce Moody:**

Now, you mentioned that early childhood education is important. I guess my question is, how important? I think when you started to address how important it is, you brought up an experience you had with a peach tree farmer. Maybe you can use that analogy to talk about just how important early childhood education is.

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

Sure. I'm happy to tell you about the peach tree farmer. So I was living in Bethany, Connecticut, at the time when I was a professor at Yale. And I ran into a peach tree farmer, and I said, "Mr. Doolittle, if you were to put a seed in the ground and you wanted to grow a peach tree that was going to provide good peaches at the end ... and say we could divide the life of a peach tree into three phases. The first phase is the seed into the ground until it sprouts. The second phase is the sprout turns into a tree. And the third phase is when the tree begins to bear fruit and you want good peaches. And say for instance, you could make one of those phases absolutely perfect, which one would you choose?"

And without missing a beat, Mr. Doolittle said, "Well, I would pick the first one." And I said, "Well, why?" And he said, "Because whatever you do for that little seed sets the potential for everything that tree can become." And in many ways, I think that's a perfect metaphor for why early childhood matters. Not because it's the only stage in a child's life that matters, but because everything that we do or fail to do with a young child sets the stage for all the potential to follow.

**Bruce Moody:**

Now, you did get into the science and some of the examples of it. And I think what I'd like to ask you to do is summarize that from a science background, from an academic background. What is your pitch for putting our resources behind early childhood education and child care?

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

You'll never be able to repeat the first two, three, four, five years of a child's life. In the beginnings of life, this baby is laying down brain architecture. Babies are born with a hundred billion brain cells in their head. It's just incredible to even try to imagine how much. And their development is mostly around their brains literally forming connections between those brain cells to allow them to be able to do complex things. And there's two things happening in a child's young years. The first one is the proliferation of those neurons connecting all those brain cells. And the second thing is the dying away of the ones that aren't used. It's called pruning, and it happens naturally within the brain, but at an incredibly high rate of speed when you're talking about young children.

So when we don't talk to our young children or when we're too busy to play with them, when we're too stressed out to interact with them, it takes a toll on them because they are not developing all the neuronal connections that they would normally be developing because they're going through social neglect from the adults not being able to be there. And that's why it's important that if parents have to go to work, as many do, that there's somebody who's well-trained, who's able to take care of those children and keep that child stimulated, so that that child can later on be able to benefit from an intact neurological system.

**Bruce Moody:**

I want to get some thoughts from Susan Gale Perry, who is, again, the CEO of Child Care Aware® of America. You're sitting here with ideas to share, so I want to give you the opportunity to follow up with what Dr. Gilliam has been saying.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

Thanks. Well, I always get really excited when I get to talk about young children's development and learning. And Dr. Gilliam did a fantastic job talking about the brain science behind why the early years are so important. But I like to think about it also in some other simple terms, which is some of the skills and abilities that very young children are developing are just critical for their later success in school and life. And actually, their early experiences are literally being built into their bodies and even help healthy development. So some of the things I think about when you think about what you're learning in child care, you're learning how to share, how to get along with others. Harvard Center on the Developing Child talks about executive function skills. So you're learning things like how to stay on task, how to persist, how to pay attention. And those are just the critical skills for being in the workforce later in life.

And honestly, the military knew this really early on and wrote a seminal report quite a few years ago now about ready but not able to serve, about the percentage of American adults who are just not eligible to serve in the military because they haven't graduated from high school, because they don't meet the physical fitness requirements, because they've had some sort of interaction with law enforcement in the past. And those kinds of reasons really develop early in those early experiences that I just talked about.

**Bruce Moody:**

And when we talk about development, we're talking about language, we're talking about adaptability, we're talking about social ability. And those are all the things that you absolutely need in your later years. And this is the time, what you're saying, the time to really invest in and give focus to the young minds as they're developing.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

Absolutely. I mean, it's never too late to learn. The great news is that we can always be learning. But as Dr. Gilliam said, starting out early gets you the biggest bang for your buck. That's why we've seen economists like James Heckman do studies on where you get the biggest return on investment for the dollars you invest. It is in early childhood. And Dr. Gilliam also started to talk about why it's also equally so important that we invest in the people caring for those young children, and that is our child care teachers. And what we know is coming out of the pandemic, we really have a child care teacher shortage.

So while we have gotten back to pre-pandemic levels in terms of the number of child care programs across the country, we still have not gotten back to pre-pandemic levels on our child care workforce. A lot of that is because even before the pandemic, we had a child care shortage. And the child care workforce was only making on average less than \$14 an hour. We have a very tight labor market right now, and that means that child care teachers are having to make hard choices about doing the jobs that they love or getting a better job at a big box store down the street so that they can take care of their own families.

**Bruce Moody:**

And this really is a lot of what you focused on today when you were addressing the participants at our summit, the landscape of child care in America. Can you expand on that a little bit, please?

**Susan Gale Perry:**

Absolutely. Well, right now in 2023, we're coming to the end of what has been a \$50 billion investment by Congress in keeping child care businesses open and thriving during and coming out of the pandemic. Those funds end at the end of September. So we're facing a pretty significant funding cliff. And what we know is that a lot of those funds have in fact been being used to pay higher wages to our child care teachers.

What we worry about as those funds go away and there is not a replacement for those funds, with some exceptions in some great states doing great work, is that child care businesses will be put in a really hard position of either having to charge more per parents, and child care already costs \$11,000 a year on average for one child in child care in this country, or lowering the wages of their teachers, which only means more teachers will leave the workforce. And if you don't have teachers in the classroom, child care can't be open, families can't be working, businesses

can't have employees to do the work that they need them to do every day. And children won't be as healthy and learning as they could be if they were in high quality child care.

**Bruce Moody:**

And all of that takes us into the next generation, which is when we find people who are ineligible for military service not excelling at their maybe personal or professional goals the way perhaps they would have wanted to. And that points back to the early childhood education. And so it's just a continuous cycle that you're advocating needs a lot of attention at the initial early childhood education stages.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

Absolutely. And I think Dr. Gilliam would be better than I to talk about some of the longitudinal studies that we've seen that show how investing in high quality child care is so beneficial.

**Bruce Moody:**

All right, then. Would you please share with us?

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

Sure. There's been randomized controlled trials, very rigorous studies to look at the effectiveness of early care and education programs. And when children were randomly assigned to either attend or not attend the programs when they were in their preschool years, those who attended the programs were less likely to need special remedial services, less likely to be retained a grade, more likely to graduate, less likely to be pushed out or expelled from the school. As a result, they were more likely to go to college. They earned more money, they paid more in taxes. And so it came right around.

**Bruce Moody:**

As I'm listening to all this, I understand the presentation of yours was the "Landscape of Child Care in America", but it does seem like what we're talking about is the landscape of America as a result of how we invested and put our money and our minds into early childhood education. I want to wrap up with your thoughts on that, and I'll start with you, Susan.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

I think what we know is that when child care is working, America is working. And that is, as Dr. Gilliam said, from multiple dimensions. It means that families can be in the workforce. It means that businesses have employees that yield greater productivity, which yields better economic prosperity for all of us. And it also, when we talk about military families, contributes to our national security. So when we invest in high quality child care, we really invest in all of us and in America's future and our present success.

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

I totally agree. Child care is an infrastructure. And without the work of those who care for our children, no one else works either. When you think about an infrastructure, infrastructure typically means something that's essential and everyone needs it. And at the same time, the individual can't afford it individually. In other words, the market can't bear it. And in instances like that, typically what happens is government steps in and subsidizes it. You wouldn't expect everybody who needed to get to work today to build the wrong road.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

I'll build on that just a little, when we think about child care as infrastructure, and back up and say one of the things that we know to be true about child care is that even before the pandemic, it is in essence a broken business model. And I think that's what Dr. Gilliam is speaking of when he's saying it's an infrastructure that belongs to all of us and that all of us need to invest in. Right now in America, child care is paid for exclusively on the backs of parents. And at the same time, it's a very labor-intensive market. And that means you just need a lot of adults in a classroom to make sure that really little kids are healthy, safe, and learning, and labor is expensive, even labor that isn't getting paid as well as we know child care teachers should be getting paid.

And so it's that mismatch of what it really costs to deliver high quality child care that benefits our entire economy and national security, and what parents can afford to pay. And we have to answer this question as a nation. What is the fair share for families, for businesses and communities and for the public to pay to ensure that we have a high quality child care system for every family and every child that needs it?

**Bruce Moody:**

Excellent. We'll need to end it there. And I appreciate both of you being on the podcast and being at today's child care summit.

**Dr. Walter Gilliam:**

Thank you so much.

**Susan Gale Perry:**

Thank you very much.

**Bruce Moody:**

And want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always look forward to hearing from you. Click on a link in the program notes to send us a note, a question, may be an idea for a future episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts, because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you so much for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.