

National Center for Early Education Excellence at Bright Horizons

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What Matters Most: ECE Professionals Weigh In on their Work, their Careers, and their Impact

5 million. (1) That's how many people in the U.S are identified as part of the early childhood education field. Encouragingly, early childhood education and the professionals that do this work are on the top of the national radar for the first time in, well, ever. Yet, so often the discussions, conversations, policies, and decisions made in the field are about them rather than with them.

With so much discussion about improving and elevating our field, we wanted to find out from the people who do this work every day just what they value in the workplace, how they make career decisions, and how they feel about their work. So, we asked (2). Participants in our informal survey included those that identify as early childhood educators and work directly with young children each day, but also include roles such as program leaders, quality coaches, college faculty, or development specialists.

First, we wanted to find out what factors mattered most in a professional ECE career.

Pay and traditional benefits ranked #1 and #2 respectively, with pay being the clear #1. Next, consistent schedule and additional benefits such as annual bonus or educational pay increases came in 3rd, consistent schedule came in 4th, and quality professional development rounded out the top 5.

When it comes to working in a classroom or other direct service setting, consistent age group, curriculum philosophy, and autonomy in lesson planning were the top 3 highest ranked factors.

We followed up by asking what resources or opportunities ECE professionals would value.

Coaching, mentoring, mental health services for self, and high-quality professional development were the top 4 answers within a few points of each other. Closely following, and also very close in score to one another, were mental health resources for children, inclusion and behavior resources, and child development knowledge.

Next, we asked, “What do you wish everyone knew about a career in ECE” and the most common answers included phrases such as:

“It’s hard work, but very rewarding.” (35%)

“How vitally important it is!” (20%)

“That teachers have an enormous impact on children and their learning!” (18%)

“It’s not babysitting – it’s influencing children’s futures!” (17%)

Finally, we asked what word(s) would you use to describe a career in ECE? The response rate for this question was highest because we also asked participants at our National Center of Early Education at Bright Horizons booth at the November 2023 NAEYC Conference (3).

The top 10 words were.

Rewarding Fulfilling
Fun Joyful
Challenging Love
Exciting Empowering
Inspiring Motivating

This informal peek into ECE professionals' minds both reinforces and broadens our thinking of what matters most to the professionals who dedicate themselves to the field of early childhood education.



SOURCES

(1) Summary the early care and education workforce. National Conference of State Legislatures. (2021, April 27). <https://www.ncsl.org/human-services/the-early-care-and-education-workforce#:~:text=There%20are%20nearly%205%20million,social%2C%20emotional%20and%20cognitive%20development..>

(2) Early Care and Learning Career Survey. 2023. 196 respondents across the U.S. from various ECE roles (i.e., Executive Director, College Faculty, Senior Associate of Marketing, CEO, Curriculum Specialist, Educator, Family Care Support Specialist, Early Intervention Specialist, CDA Facilitator, QRIS Manager, etc.)

(3) 315 total respondents.

