

The Mental Health Risks of Early Care and Education Workers

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By: Hannah Michael

Wright State University – Lake Campus, Celina, OH 45822



Abstract

The proposed study will examine the mental health of early care and education providers. This is an area of concern because the job performance of these workers has a direct impact on the children in their care. Researchers will contact the directors of several childcare facilities in order to find a minimum of 30 early care and education workers to participate. Online surveys measuring mental health through perceived job related stress, depression, and burnout will be emailed to all employees at these centers. The results of the study will be compared to US national averages of job related depression, stress, and burnout. It is expected that results of the study will show early care and education providers have greater mental health concerns than the average worker. The results of this study will be used to promote mental health support for the employees of early care and education centers.

Introduction

The increasing concern of mental health risks that originate in the workplace have recently become a much researched topic. Several studies have reported that there is an increased risk of mental health problems in early care and education providers (Otten et al., 2019). Furthermore, the stress, burnout, and depression that are experienced by individuals in this field of work have all been shown in previous studies to play a role in this increase of mental health risk. The aim of the proposed study is to assess the mental health of early care and education providers through a survey composed of questions taken from well-known survey inventories measuring stress, burnout, and depression. The results from these surveys will be compared to the national averages of stress, depression, and burnout for the average worker.

Researchers Gratz and Claffey (1996) looked at stress as a cause for mental health risks in early care and education providers through a survey of 446 of these workers. They found that 57% of the directors and 35% of the teachers in these centers reported that working with children was stressful or extremely stressful. A study conducted by Decker et al. (2002) looked at the risk of burnout in 63 early care and education workers. They had the participants complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory which measures burnout through emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Results from this survey showed 54% of those in the study felt emotionally exhausted and 51% believed themselves to be depersonalized. Researcher Ling (2018) measured depression in 80 early care and education workers through “Dr. Gavin Andrew’s 7-item depression screener”. Results from this study showed that 28.8% of the participants had major depression and 31.3% had depressive symptoms. Results also showed that 24% of participants could be diagnosed with or had major depression or dysthymia. This study included that according to the National Institute of Health, the national average of these diagnoses is only 6.7%. Based off of the results from these previous studies, the hypothesis for the current proposed study is that early care and education workers will have greater mental health risks than individuals who work in other occupations.

Methods

Participants

The population for this study will be early care and education workers who are employed at childcare centers. Researchers will look for a minimum of 30 total early care and education workers. The participation of the childcare centers and their employees will be encouraged by explaining why the study is being conducted, why the results of the study will be significant, and how they will be beneficial to the childcare center. All participants will complete the surveys anonymously and researchers will not collect any personal information that could potentially cause harm to the participants. Participants will also be unable to view one another’s results of the survey. Researchers will also have a control group for this study that will be composed of individuals who work in any career field in the United States that have completed a survey measuring stress, depression, and burnout. The national averages for worker stress and burnout will be taken from the results of surveys completed by The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (2014). The national averages for depression will be taken from surveys done on mental health through the CDC (Division of Population Health & National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2019).

Materials and Procedure

The survey for this study will contain several questions from reliable questionnaires that measure stress, depression, and burnout. Researchers will use the Perceived Stress Scale to measure stress (Cohen et al., 1983). One of the questions on this inventory is “In the last month, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?”. To measure depression, researchers will use Beck’s Depression Inventory (Beck et al., 1961). One of the questions from this inventory requires respondents to pick one of these four statements: “0- I do not feel sad, 1- I feel sad, 2- I am sad all the time and I can’t snap out of it, 3- I am so sad and unhappy that I can’t stand it”. In order to measure burnout, researchers will use the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach et al., 1996). An example of one of the statements in the inventory is “I doubt the significance of my work”.

For this study, researchers will contact the directors of several local childcare centers through email and explain the study. If the directors are willing to participate, they will provide the email addresses of their early care and education workers to the researchers. Researchers will then send the survey, which will be created through Survey Monkey, to all employees. For this study, researchers will look for a minimum of 3 early care and education centers to get their desired 30 participants from. The results of the entire survey will be provided to the directors of the centers so that they can be used to assist them in increasing the quality of care in their centers. Once the surveys are completed, they will be scored and compared to national averages of similar surveys completed on worker stress, burnout, and depression.



Predicted Results

This study will use three one-sample t-tests to analyze the data from the surveys. Once the participants complete their surveys, each section of the inventory will be scored. The independent variable for this study is type of career. Those with a career in early care and education are being compared to those who work in different career fields. This study has three dependent variables: stress, depression, and burnout. These variables are all being used as a measurement of the overall mental health of early care and education workers and the average worker group. Each participant will have three separate scores that will be taken from the stress, depression, and burnout inventories and will be calculated by summing each relevant score. The scores from each of these inventories for each participant will be averaged in order to find what percentage of early care and education workers in the study experience job related stress, depression, and burnout.

It is expected that the national averages will be significantly lower than the survey scores for the early care and education provider group for all three of the dependent variables. The finding of a significant difference would support the hypothesis that early care and education providers are more at risk for mental health concerns. However, results could show that there is no significant difference between the control and experimental group. Results could also show that the average worker experiences a greater risk to mental health than early care and education workers. For these results to occur, the percentages attained from the survey completed by the early care and education workers would be less than the national averages. These results would disprove the initial hypothesis of the study.

Discussion

If the results from the proposed study show that early care and education providers are more at risk to mental health concerns than those who pursue other careers, there will be many implications related to those who work in this field. Firstly, this means that these workers are suffering and some type of intervention needs to happen at the facilities where they work in order for them to get the help that they need. Also, if these workers are struggling with their mental health, then their level of job performance is not going to be as high. Studies have shown that children in the care of providers who had a mental health problem were shown to display a greater amount of problem or challenging behaviors, as well as a distinct lack of socioemotional growth (Roberts et al., 2016). This means that when early care and education providers are suffering from mental health problems and they don’t get the help that they need, the children in their care suffer too.

The positive mental health of early care and education workers is essential in providing quality services to the children who are under the care of these workers (Gratz & Claffey, 1996). The mental health risks of early care and education providers is important to acknowledge so that these individuals can be given the help and support that they need in order to provide the children in their centers the highest quality care possible. Several more studies like this one should be proposed in order to investigate this claim further. This would spread more awareness about the seriousness of the topic and hopefully lead to childcare centers providing services and support for their childcare providers.

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