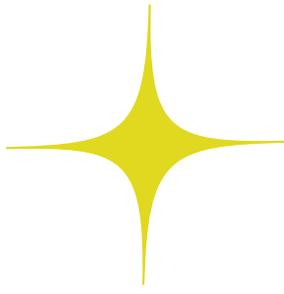


A Year of Progress: 10 Bright Spots for Child Care and Early Learning

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Even in a year marked by a government shutdown, political turbulence, and general unpredictability in Washington, **2025 gave us plenty to celebrate for child care and early learning**. Families, advocates, and bipartisan champions turned challenges into bright spots. As we head into 2026, these accomplishments don't just mark progress, they fuel the momentum for what comes next.

FFYF is fortunate to be engaged in this work and is forever grateful to partners who help to make these wins possible. **Together, these 10 bright spots lay a strong foundation for continued progress in supporting children and families across the country.**

Expansion of Child Care-Related Tax Credits

Tucked within this summer's tax reconciliation package was meaningful support for families: permanently expanded child care tax credits.

The Win: A \$16 billion investment strengthened three key child care supports. Under the expanded Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC), an estimated 4 million families could receive larger credits—up to \$2,400 for families with two or more children. The 45F employer credit was increased and made more accessible to small businesses that provide child care for employees. And for the first time since 1986, the amount of pre-tax income parents can set aside in Dependent Care Assistance Plans (DCAP) was raised.

Public Support for Child Care Remained Exceptionally High

From small towns to big cities, voters of every party and region agree: child care is a national priority that lawmakers must address.

Bright Spot: FFYF conducted six polls in 2025 — covering Head Start in response to proposed cuts, showcasing support in rural communities, and testing public reaction to the recently passed tax bill — and found overwhelming bipartisan support for federal action. These results provided Members of Congress with the confidence and political cover needed to engage on child care, helping keep the issue front and center on Capitol Hill.

Head Start Protected After Threatened Elimination

In February, a leaked OMB memo calling for elimination of Head Start prompted widespread concern. Families, providers, and advocates responded immediately.

Bright Spot: Following intense public and congressional pressure, and bolstered by FFYF's rapid polling showing overwhelming public support, the proposal was abandoned, and the President's budget ultimately preserved Head Start funding at current levels. This win was reinforced later in the year, as Members of Congress mobilized in support of Head Start funding during and after the government shutdown, demonstrating the strength of bipartisan support for this essential program.

Bipartisan Momentum Continued to Grow

Even in a deeply polarized Congress, child care remains a rare area of bipartisan cooperation.

Momentum: Of the 110 child care bills introduced this year, nearly half were bipartisan. Notable legislation included the Child Care Modernization Act to strengthen the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), the Child Care Availability and Affordability Act to expand child care tax credits, the Child Care Workforce Act to address early educator shortages, and the HEADWAY Act to ease workforce shortages. Each bill was supported by Senators and Representatives from both parties, demonstrating strong cross-party commitment to actionable solutions for families and early educators.

Child Care and Development Block Grant Modernization Gained Traction

Modernizing CCDBG is critical to better reflect today's child care needs for families, providers, and employers. This year saw an important step forward in achieving that goal.

Bright Spot: A bipartisan group of Senators introduced the Child Care Modernization Act, comprehensive legislation to strengthen CCDBG. The bill improves access, affordability, quality, and stability, protecting the program today while driving long-term gains for families and providers.

Preschool Development Grant (PDG) Renewal Secured

Following months of uncertainty about the future of PDG grants, states received much-needed clarity in November.

The Win: A new round of PDG funding was announced, prompting applications from states across the country for grants ranging from \$500,000 to \$15,000,000. Awards will enable states to innovate, improve efficiency, and strengthen early learning systems nationwide.

Congressional Engagement Reached New Levels

Child care and early learning stayed front-and-center on Capitol Hill through hearings and briefings across multiple committees.

The Win: A steady drumbeat of briefings and convenings helped deepen congressional understanding, strengthen relationships, and grow a bipartisan bench of champions prepared to advance and defend child care policy. FFYF, alongside a broad coalition of partners, convened briefings and events focused on key issues such as tax policy, Head Start, child care's role in supporting small businesses like restaurants, and the case for child care as essential infrastructure.

A highlight was the hearing "Child Care and the American Workforce: Removing Barriers to Economic Growth," featuring experts, researchers, and community leaders who emphasized the critical role of affordable, high-quality child care in enabling parents to work and fueling the U.S. economy. Members on both sides of the aisle agreed on the need for federal support, including CCDBG and the CDCTC.

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A Strong National Coalition Was Activated and Strategically Leveraged

FFYF led a robust federal child care coalition of nearly 100 active organizations united around shared policy goals.

Bright Spot: Together, the coalition drove 4 community sign-on letters (including to the Trump transition team and in support of expanded tax credits), organized several Days of Action, and co-hosted 4 Hill receptions that brought Members of Congress and advocates together to strengthen relationships and elevate child care priorities.

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Child Care's Media Profile Hit Historic Highs

Coverage of child care has shifted from a niche issue to a central economic and workforce story.

Continued Momentum: Before 2020, fewer than 20% of child care media stories focused on policy; today, nearly half do. Mentions in both traditional and nontraditional outlets surged from roughly 263,000 in 2019 to nearly 1.5 million in 2025, keeping child care squarely in the national conversation.

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The Fight to Secure Federal Investments in Child Care Continues

While child care and early learning continue to demonstrate their value to families, businesses, and the broader economy, securing sustained federal investment remains an ongoing challenge in a constrained budget environment.

Where the Work Ahead Lies: In FY2026, 285 Members of Congress called for increased funding for child care and early learning — a strong foundation to build upon. Senate appropriators advanced a funding bill proposing an \$85 million increase for both the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start, signaling continued recognition of these programs' importance. The coming months will be critical to turn this momentum into enacted funding, protect programs, and ensure Congress follows through on its commitments to families, providers, and employers.

