



## How Do Parents Make Decisions about ECE Arrangements?

Historically, there has been a lack of nationally representative data that describe the decisionmaking process parents use when seeking early care and education (ECE) arrangements for their children. This brief describes findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) about how families make these types of decisions. The survey was given to a sample of families who had searched for care for a young child (birth to 5 years) in the past 2 years. The brief concludes with questions for further exploration by state leaders.

### Why Do Families Search for Care?

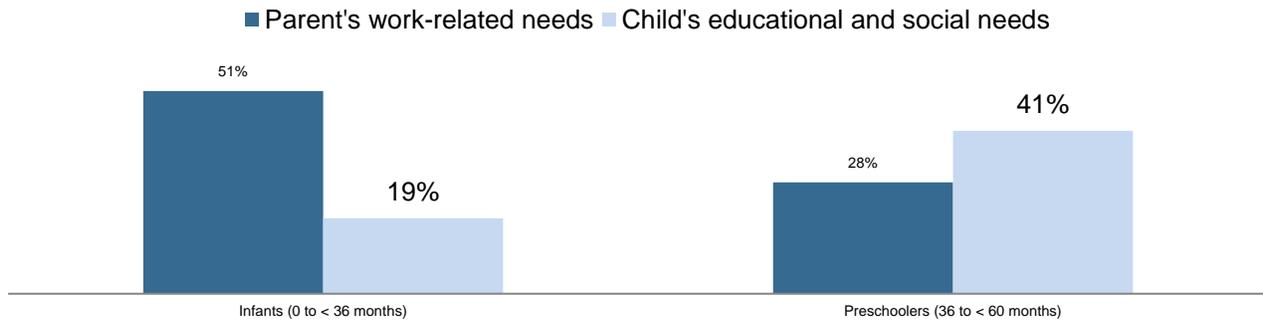
As of 2012, approximately half (47 percent) of the estimated 11.4 million U.S. households with children under age 5 had searched for ECE arrangements within the past 2 years (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 11). Of these households, approximately 61 percent had searched for an ECE arrangement for an infant or toddler, and 39 percent had searched for an ECE arrangement for a preschooler. Four in 10 (42 percent) of households searching for ECE reported that their main reason for initiating the search was “so that I could work/change in work schedule” (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 11). More than a quarter of households (28 percent) reported that their first reason for initiating the search was “to provide my child with educational or social enrichment.” When the data were disaggregated by age group, results indicated that families seeking care for infants and toddlers were much more likely to state that the search was initiated for work-related reasons, and families with preschoolers were more likely to state their search was to provide their child with educational and social enrichment (see figure 1).

This brief is one of a [six-part series](#) providing information excerpted from the 2012 NSECE, a nationally representative study that includes the following surveys:

- Household Survey with approximately 12,000 parents or guardians who have children younger than 13 years
- Home-Based Provider Survey with approximately 6,000 interviews
- Center-Based Provider Survey with approximately 8,200 directors of programs on state or national administrative lists.
- A Workforce Provider Survey with 5,600 classroom-assigned center staff members.

The information in this brief is based on the report *Household Search for and Perceptions of Early Care and Education: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)* (NSECE Project Team, 2014).

Figure 1. Primary Reason for Searching for Care



## How Do Parents Search for Care When Considering More Than One Provider?

Of the households searching for care, approximately two-thirds (62 percent) considered more than one provider (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 14). Parents who considered two or more providers were asked to select up to two ways they searched for care from the following list:

- ◆ Asked friends or family with children
- ◆ Asked potential contacts who are providers themselves
- ◆ Looked at community service, resource, and referral lists
- ◆ Posted an ad or responded to an ad
- ◆ Checked the yellow pages, newspapers, or bulletin boards
- ◆ Sought welfare or social services
- ◆ Asked a health-care provider
- ◆ Other

The most common search method was asking friends and family with children (63 percent). This was followed by “other” (39 percent), which most notably included internet searches (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 14).

## How Do Parents Search for Care When Only One Provider Is Considered?

Approximately 37 percent of parents searching for care only considered one provider. These parents were asked to report how they searched for or learned about that provider (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 15). Responses were then coded into one of four categories. Most respondents (71 percent) indicated that they knew the provider, had previously used the provider, or had learned about the provider from a family member or friend (see table 1).

Table 1. Search Method Used by Parents Who Only Considered One ECE Provider

Search Method	Percentage of Parents
Self, friends, or family members worked with or used this provider, or knew the provider	71%



Search Method	Percentage of Parents
Provider has a good reputation in the community, or there was no other provider of this type in the area	10%
Resource and referral agency	9%
Advertisement online or elsewhere	8%

Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014.

## What Type of Information Do Parents Who Are Considering More Than One Provider Collect?

Parents who considered more than one provider were asked to report on the type of information they collected when searching for an ECE provider. The first three factors they reported were documented.<sup>1</sup> Results indicate that parents were most likely to collect information on the fees charged (39 percent), type of care offered (36 percent), and hours of care (35 percent). Fewer parents collected information on the content of the program (26 percent) and the curriculum or philosophy of the program (18 percent).

The extent to which parents considered cost as a primary factor in choosing child care varied by household poverty status (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 17). Families below the federal poverty level were less likely to gather information related to fees than those above the poverty level (25 percent versus more than 40 percent).

The information parents considered also varied by child age, as shown in table 2 (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 16). Families searching for care for infants and toddlers (children younger than 36 months) primarily considered fees charged, hours of care, and type of care. Those searching for ECE arrangements for preschoolers were more likely to primarily consider fees charged, type of care, and program content. More parents searching for ECE for preschoolers reported that they considered the content or the curriculum or philosophy of the program, as compared to parents searching for ECE for infants and toddlers. These results align with reports that parents seeking ECE for preschoolers are more likely to be primarily interested in their children's educational and social needs, whereas parents of infants and toddlers are more likely to primarily seek ECE arrangements for work-related reasons ( for example, new job, work schedule change).

**Table 2. Information Considered in the Search for an ECE Provider, by Child Age**

Information Considered	Percentage of Parents Considering	
	Infants and Toddlers (younger than 36 months)	Preschoolers (36 to 60 months)
Acceptance or availability of subsidies	2%	3%
Content of program	24%	31%
Curriculum or philosophy	14%	24%
Fees charged	42%	33%
Financial aid availability	2%	3%
Geographic location	15%	13%

<sup>1</sup> Parents who considered more than one provider were asked about the type of information they gathered when selecting their care provider. Responses are not mutually exclusive, as interviewers documented parents' first three mentions (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 16).



Information Considered	Percentage of Parents Considering	
	Infants and Toddlers (younger than 36 months)	Preschoolers (36 to 60 months)
Hours of care	38%	29%
Licensing status	8%	6%
Services provided (e.g., transportation, meals)	10%	10%
Teacher tenure or turnover	5%	3%
Type of care	37%	35%

Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014.

## Questions for States to Consider

- ◆ **Consumer education requirements.** The reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Fund has new consumer education requirements. Has the state considered how this information informs the development of its website(s) and other materials and outreach strategies?
- ◆ **State-level data.** Are there state-level data about the factors parents in your State consider when selecting ECE options, including the number of providers they consider, and the basis for searching for ECE? Within the State’s strategic plan, are there special populations of focus, and, if so, are there data about how these populations think about and select ECE for their children?
- ◆ **Help for parents considering only one provider.** NSECE findings indicate that 37 percent of parents considered only one provider when choosing child care. The findings also show that many parents had a relationship with their chosen provider or the provider was used by families in their social network. Of the parents who considered two or more providers, most were still likely to search for care providers by asking family or friends. What strategies can your State use to penetrate these social networks? Are there strategies that ECE providers can use to talk with the families they serve to spread the word? Are there strategies that the State can use to help high-quality providers ( for example, those in higher levels of the quality rating and improvement system and those in Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships) focus on outreach? How is your State conveying information about ECE so parents and their families and friends are more knowledgeable about finding high-quality care?
- ◆ **Increased awareness about early learning and infants and toddlers.** How can your State increase parental knowledge about the educational value of infant and toddler care? It may be that ongoing efforts to educate the American public about the benefit of preschool may explain why parents of preschoolers are more likely to be interested in child care as a way to support their children’s social and educational development (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). However, research also highlights the importance of early learning experiences for infants and toddlers (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016).
- ◆ **Considering parental costs.** Are there efforts in your State to help cover the cost of high-quality ECE so that lower-income families are not restricted to making decisions on ECE arrangements based solely or primarily on cost? Are there data in your State about the percentage of families with young children who are eligible for child care assistance, particularly at high-quality programs, and who are receiving assistance? Do you have information about the number of families who are on a waiting list to receive child care assistance? Cost was the most frequently reported type of information collected by parents, although lower-income parents did not consider cost as much. This finding suggests that public funding to subsidize the cost of child care may be influencing parents’ choices about child care. Moreover, if parents know that they will have some government support to cover the cost of child care, then factors besides cost may influence their choice of child care.



- ◆ **Considering parent costs and quality.** Does your State permit the waiving or discounting of copayments for families who choose higher-quality providers? This is a permitted state option under the federal child care law.

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