



## Center-Based Early Care and Education Programs: Program Size and Ages Served

The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) provides the first nationally representative portrait of center-based early care and education (ECE) in over 20 years. This brief is focused on describing enrollment size, ages served, and the extent to which center hours of operations vary by age group served. Information from the national survey is highlighted first. The last section of the brief includes questions for state ECE leaders to consider in light of the information presented.

### How Many Young Children Are in Center-Based ECE Programs?

Approximately 6,980,000 children ages 5 and younger are cared for in one of the 129,000 center-based ECE programs operating across the United States (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 3).

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.

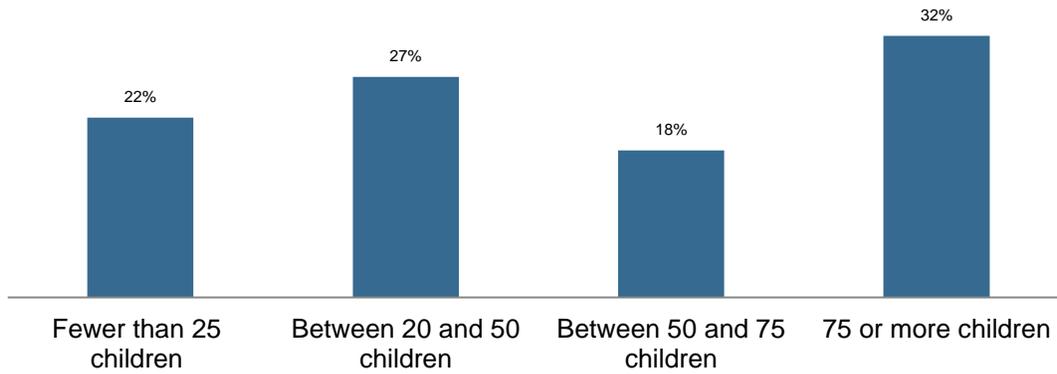
The information in this brief is based on the report *Characteristics of Center-based Early Care and Education Programs: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)* (NSECE Project Team, 2014).

### What Is the Enrollment Size of Center-Based Programs?

Approximately one-third of center-based programs serve more than 75 children, and about half of programs serve fewer than 50 children (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 5).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Enrollment size includes all children ages 13 years and younger who are enrolled in the program. One percent of programs had an enrollment size that was undetermined.

Figure 1. Percentage of Programs by Program Enrollment Size

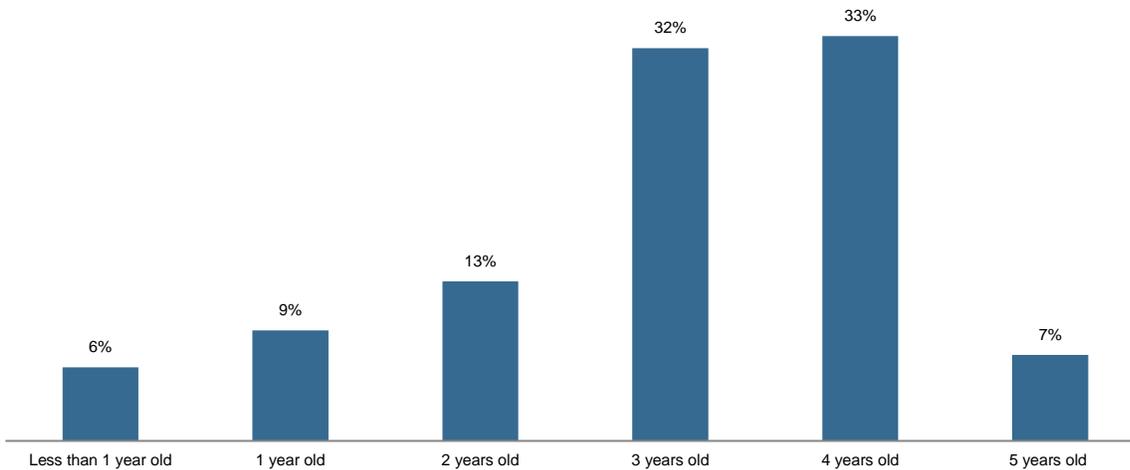


Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014. Exhibit 2.

## What Age Groups Are Being Served by Center-Based Programs?

As seen in figure 2, the largest age group being served by center-based programs is 3- and 4-year-olds, who make up about 65 percent of the children enrolled in center-based care (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 3).

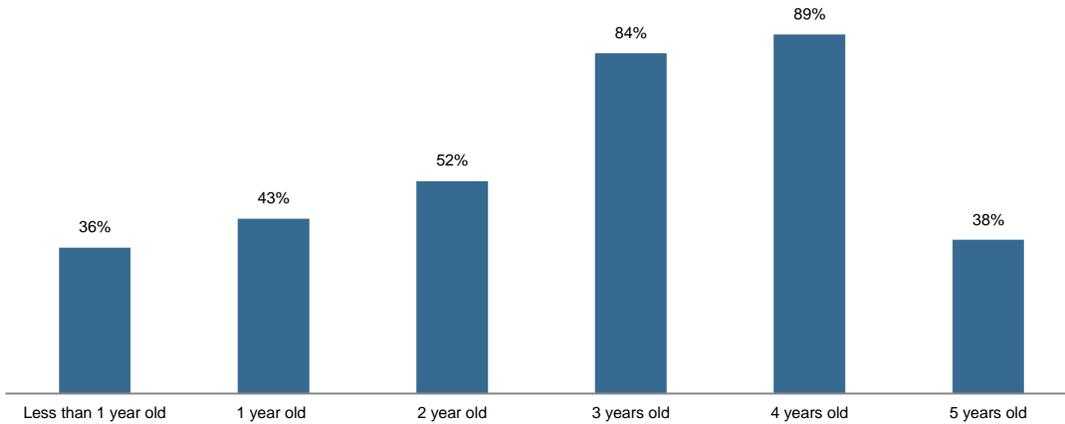
Figure 2. Percentage of Children Enrolled by Age of Child



Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014. Exhibit 1.

Figure 3 shows that the percentage of programs serving 3- and 4-year-olds is significantly higher than the share serving children from birth to age 2 (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 3).

Figure 3. Percentage of Programs by Age of Child



Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014. Exhibit 2.

Most programs serve a combination of age groups (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 4). Table 1 shows the combinations of ages served by center-based programs. About a third of programs only serve children between ages 3 and 5. A quarter of programs serve children from birth to age 5.

Table 1. Percentage of Programs by Combination of Age Groups Served

Combination of Age Groups Served	Percentage of Programs
Preschoolers	30%
Infants and toddlers and preschoolers	25%
Preschoolers and school-age children	15%
Infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children	27%
All other age group combinations	3%

Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014.

Notes: Some programs may only serve a portion of a given age group. For instance, programs counted as serving preschoolers may only serve 4-year-olds. “All other age group combinations” includes programs serving only infants and toddlers and programs serving infants and toddlers and school-age children, but not children ages 3 to 5.

## Do Centers’ Hours of Operation Vary Based on Ages Served?

Seventy percent of ECE programs that provide services for children from birth to age 5 are open at least 30 hours a week (NSECE Project Team, 2014, p. 5). However, hours of operation vary across programs serving specific age groups (table 2). The variation is most notable in programs only serving children ages 3 to 5: fewer than half (42 percent) operate for at least 30 hours a week.



Table 2. Percentage of Programs That Operate at Least 30 Hours a Week, by Age Groups Served

Age Group Served	Percentage Open at Least 30 Hours a Week
Infants and toddlers and preschoolers	85%
Preschoolers	42%
Preschoolers and school-age children	64%
Infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children	94%
All other age group combinations	81%

Source: NSECE Project Team, 2014.

## Questions for States to Consider

- ◆ **Smaller centers.** According to the NSECE, about half of all centers serve fewer than 50 children. Are there data in your State to indicate whether center enrollment aligns with this national picture? Smaller centers may not have as much capacity as large centers to manage the business (for example, offer health insurance benefits) or focus on quality improvement (for example, hire a curriculum specialist). If your State has a large percentage of small centers, are there particular supports available for them (for example, shared services, quality improvement specialists, director leadership training)?
- ◆ **Centers serving infants and toddlers.** Fewer centers reported serving infants and toddlers. Other NSECE data indicate that centers participating in public prekindergarten are less likely to serve infants and toddlers (NSECE Project Team, 2015). How does your State monitor access to quality ECE for infants and toddlers? If center access is limited for infants and toddlers, are there strategies to encourage more high-quality programs to serve infants and toddlers?
- ◆ **Serving working families.** Fewer than half of centers serving only preschool-age children are open for 30 hours or more each week. Assuming that most parents work full-time, these centers may not be meeting the needs of working families. Are there data in your State about hours of operation for centers serving children of different ages? Are there incentives or supports to encourage programs to be open for the hours needed by the families they serve?



## References

- NSECE [National Survey of Early Care and Education] Project Team. (2014). *Characteristics of center-based early care and education programs: Initial findings from the national survey of early care and education (NSECE)*, OPRE Report #2014-73a. Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/characteristics-of-center-based-early-care-and-education-programs-initial-findings-from-the-national-survey-of-early>
- NSECE Project Team. (2015). *Which early care and education centers participate in head start or public pre-kindergarten?* OPRE Report #2015-92a. Washington DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/which-early-care-and-education-centers-participate-in-head-start-or-public-pre-kindergarten>

*The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) works with state and territory leaders and their partners to create innovative early childhood systems and programs that improve results for children and families. The SCBC is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.*

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