

SPOTLIGHT ON QUALITY: WHAT CHOICES DO FAMILIES MAKE AND WHY?

SCHOOL-AGE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

This document is the second in a three-part series that summarizes:

1. What quality school-age care is and why it matters;
2. **What choices families make and why;** and
3. How State and Territory subsidy policies can increase options and support family decisions.

Research indicates choices families make regarding school-age care for their children impact their children’s success in school and beyond (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2009). This document summarizes families’ selection of school-age care arrangements and is presented in two sections:

- **What School-Age Care Choices Do Families Make?**
- **How Do Families Choose School-Age Care?**

What School-Age Care Choices Do Families Make?

Arrangements vary by age groups

Table 1 shows that the majority of school-age children in child care between the ages of 6 and 13 in are in center-based settings. Almost half of children 13 years or older spend time in the family home. About one-third are in center-based care.

Table 1 Child Care and Development Fund Preliminary Estimates: Average Monthly Percentages of Children in Child Care by Age Category and Care Type

Age Group	Child’s Home	Family Home	Group Home	Center	Total
Infants (0 to <1 yr)	5%	25%	6%	64%	100%
Toddlers (1 yr to <3 yrs)	3%	22%	7%	68%	100%
Preschool (3 yrs to <6 yrs)	3%	18%	5%	74%	100%
School Age (6 yrs to <13 yrs)	7%	27%	5%	61%	100%
13 years and older	14%	48%	5%	33%	100%
All Ages	5%	22%	6%	68%	100%

Source: ACF-801 data for FFY 2011 (United States Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care, 2013).

Arrangements vary by income and from school year to summer.

The high cost of school-age care can prevent low-income families from participating. Many families have difficulty affording the care on their own and cannot get help paying for it. (Capizzano, Adelman, & Stagner, 2002).

Limited participation in summer programming can impact children’s academic success. Studies have shown that youth from economically disadvantaged households are more likely than their middle- and upper-income peers to lose ground in reading and math over the summer, leading to major differences in high school completion (Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson, 2007).

Table 2 is a review of out-of-school arrangements for all children in grades K–8. It compares all children during the school year, by age group, to children in families with incomes under \$25,000. It also compares afterschool arrangements to summer arrangements for all children.

Table 2 Family Income, After School, and Summer Arrangements

Type of Care	Family Income under \$25,000	After School Care Grades K-2	After School Care Grades 3-5	After School Care Grades 6-8	Summer Arrangements
Parental care	58%	57%	55%	67%	30%
Relative care	16%	16%	17%	12%	34%
Nonrelative care	5%	8%	6%	3%	14%
Center-/school-based programs	23%	21%	25%	14%	24%
Afterschool activity used for supervision	6%	5%	8%	9%	NA
Self-care	13%	2%	7%	27%	11%
Summer school	NA	NA	NA	NA	6%

Source: School-age child care arrangements (Lawrence & Kreader, 2006).

Note: Numbers represent percentage by type of care and may equal more than 100% due to the use of multiple arrangements.

After school, more than half of children are with parents, and 24% are in relative and nonrelative care. During the summer, however, fewer children are with their parents; more than half are in self-care or relative and nonrelative care. Over the summer 11% of children are in self-care and lack supervision during the long hours and weeks of summer. So much unsupervised time leads to many concerns, including a lack of exposure to experiential learning opportunities. This lack of exposure to learning experiences in the summer months can lead to summer learning loss (Miller, 2007).

How Do Families Choose School-Age Care?

Cost, availability, location, and schedules impact families' choices for school-age care arrangements (Child Care Aware of America, 2012; Grossman, Lind, Hayes, McMaken, & Gersick, 2009; Ross & Paulsell, 1998).

- Research suggests that low-income children may have less access to safe, high-quality programs, and parents in poor and dangerous environments may be more likely to restrict their children's activities to the home (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).
- Twenty percent of low-income families and 35% of higher income families indicated that it is easy to find out-of-school programs that are high quality, affordable, and conveniently located (Duffett & Johnson, 2004).
- Usage rates appear to be strongly influenced by program characteristics such as cost and ease of access/transportation. Youth interest in programs also affects usage. Still, more information is needed about how available and accessible programs are to families and what keeps youth from participating in after school programs (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2009).

In one study (Lawrence & Kreader, 2006), parents reported the following factors as “very important” in selecting school-age arrangements:

- Reliability (90%);
- Availability of care provider (81%);
- Location (78%);
- Learning activities (61%);
- Time with other children (55%);
- Cost (44%); and
- Number of children in care group (37%).

In another study, 66% of parents indicated they had a pre-existing relationship with the provider or were referred to a provider chosen by friends, families, and neighbors. When asked to rate the importance of various factors, low-income families had different priorities than other families as summarized in Table 3 below (Layzer, Goodson, & Brown-Lyons, 2007).

Table 3 Family Ratings of Program Factors

Level of Importance	All Families	Families with Low Income
Very Important	Level of trust and comfort with caregiver Reliable services	Is a relative Has training
Important	Quality of program Helping child with school Provides engaging learning activities	Location Cost Flexible hours

Source: National Study of Child Care for Low-Income Families: Care in the home: A description of family child care and the experiences of the families and children that use it: Final report (Layzer et al., 2007).

And while few families may be aware of quality rating and improvement systems, one study found that 73% said a STARS level would be somewhat or very important in choosing a child care provider (Starr et al., 2012).

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