

2009 CCPRC Annual Meeting
Breakout C-2
Friday, October 30, 2009, 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

How Parents Use Child Care Information: The Known and Unknown

Description

Numerous public and private investments are built on the assumption that provision of information to parents will have a positive impact on parents' child care decision making. During this session, panelists and participants explored what is known and not known about the impact of information on child care decision making.

Presenters shared findings from several studies that provide insight about how parents use information in making child care decisions as well as a framework for examining what we know about the use of quality information in child care decision making. Presenters and session participants discussed research that is needed to inform efforts to provide information to parents. The level of information and the format in which information is provided to parents was also addressed.

Moderator

Roberta Weber, Oregon State University

Panelists

Cherie Rains, National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
Shannon Williams, Dynamic Research and Evaluation
Kathryn Tout, Child Trends

Scribe

Joellen Lewsader Guenin, Purdue University

1. Documents in Session Folder:

- “QRIS from a Parent’s Perspective: Is It Working?” Kathryn Tout, Martha Zaslow, and Nikki Forry.
- “Providing Information on Child Care to Parents: Preliminary Findings from Oregon,” Shannon T. Williams.
- “How Parents Use Child Care Information: The Known and Unknown,” Cherie Rains.

2. Summary of Presentations

- **Summary of Presentation #1: Kathryn Tout**
 - Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) from a parent’s perspective: Is it working?
 - Parent demand: General assumption that more information about quality will increase parent demand for higher quality care. We don't have much information if this is working or true.
 - Do parents want comparative information about quality?
 - Parents lack information about the quality of early care and education settings.

- Parent surveys indicate that a high proportion of parents (about 90%) say they would like to use QRIS. We don't have data to show, in practice, the percentage of parents that use QRIS information to make child care decisions.
 - Can parents access information about quality?
 - Study in Washington State:
 - Who do parents trust as a source of information? Child care providers, physicians, and friends/family members. Preferences varied by parent characteristics.
 - Study in Minnesota:
 - Parents have less access to Internet which is the primary way QRIS information is shared.
 - Parents indicate that they prefer "trusted advisors" as a source of information.
 - Need to look at how a particular community would like to receive information.
 - We don't know who goes to the Website; we only know the number of hits.
 - Do parents use information?
 - Parents' value: quality and cost.
 - Parents may not understand terms used in QRIS (licensing, accreditation, curriculum, etc).
 - Need to consider the format of information shared with parents.
 - Summary of information.
 - Levels:
 - Perception differs between levels – do parents care about the difference between a 2 and 3 star, for example?
 - Additional information provided for families (i.e., information about the provider's philosophy).
 - Future research needs:
 - When parents are in the midst of the decision-making process is QRIS information most useful?
 - Does QRIS help or hinder parents' decision making?
- **Summary of Presentation #2: Shannon Williams**
 - *Preliminary findings in Oregon research.*
 - Quality Indicators Program (statewide): Seven structural indicators on all center and family child care providers.
 - Community Childcare Initiative (Portland, OR)
 - Eligibility for services determined by Quality Indicators (see above).
 - Funds and supports to center-based providers to improve quality.
 - Generous subsidies to low-income families using higher quality center or family child care providers.
 - Findings: Parents do care about quality.
 - They rate it as more important than cost.
 - They rate the seven indicators as very important.
 - Findings: Parents want information:
 - About quality guidelines.
 - Parents prefer to interpret information on their own because they each have their own needs and priorities.

- Findings: What is the impact of information on choices?
 - Parents want information, but they remain skeptical about what the impact of more information about quality would be on their decisions because of factors including cost, availability, and flexible hours.
 - Extra subsidies seem to help parents stay with quality providers.
 - Parents need more high-quality options in their own communities.
- Supply and demand.
 - Care is in high demand; in general, it doesn't matter what the quality is.
 - Cost of quality care is out of reach for families and providers.
- What would a successful model do?
 - Findings (Oregon Market Rate Survey & Oregon Population Survey; Weber, 2010):
 - Increase in demand stirs increase in price for paid care.
 - Lower-income families are moving out of the paid care market.
 - What happens to lower social and economic status (SES) families?
- Future Research?
 - Use of information?
 - Market forces?
- **Summary of Presentation #3: Cherie Rains**
 - *How do parents use information?*
 - National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) used focus groups to gather data from a diverse sample of parents.
 - How parents define quality.
 - Use self as referent voice.
 - Compare care to what they would provide.
 - Do not understand definitions used in defining child care quality.
 - For parents, quality is a place where a child can learn and develop.
 - Parents may have different meanings from experts in their view of learning.
 - Parents want their child to be excited and happy where they are (loving, caring attitude in the provider). They want to feel comfortable, "Is the teacher happy in her work?"
 - Parents want cleanliness and safety.
 - Choosing care:
 - Most important factors for parents are cost, safety, and learning environment.
 - What parents want and what they use are two different things.
 - Parents rely on their gut instinct.
 - Many parents need multiple settings to cover care so they have to make multiple decisions.
 - Parents assume provider is licensed.
 - Parental assumptions:
 - All providers read to children (not a reality).
 - All providers have a background check (not a reality).
 - All providers are licensed (not a reality).

- All programs are inspected (not a reality).
- Parental compromises:
 - They pay more than they wanted to.
 - They travel further than they had planned.
 - They have had to sacrifice personal goals (e.g., promotions).
 - They have given up their “wish list” car.
- What is needed?
 - Consistent terminology.
 - Knowledge of subsidies, providers in area, and true costs.
 - What are the questions parents need to ask providers?

3. Summary of Discussion with Presenters and Participants

- Parents sometimes view quality differently than States do. States need to be respectful of parents’ views because parents know their own children and families best.
- A discussion ensued about how QRIS can respond to how parents make choices. Question was raised about whether individual family needs can be captured in a rating system. Or States could use the seven indicators to show they value parents’ ability to prioritize what is important to them. Parents want something easy to understand.
- There was discussion about how researchers need to balance parents’ needs and views alongside initiatives that promote quality. Parents want ‘school readiness’ activities even if they are not developmentally appropriate. Parents can’t choose something that doesn’t exist. If quality care isn’t available, parents can’t choose it. It is important to make sure parents have access to the information they need to make child care decisions.
- Issue was raised about the need to include school-aged children. The group agreed that school-age children aren’t typically addressed explicitly in QRIS. Issues of age and culture could be addressed better, but the group asked whether this can be incorporated into metrics.
- There was discussion about whether Head Start (HS) families use different information than non-HS families in making decisions. In the Early Head Start study, no difference was found. Sometimes HS information is not included on State websites. Minnesota rates HS at the highest level of quality. Need to consider how QRIS works for programs that are free for families. Discussion focused on how accreditation and compliance with HS performance standards should be included in QRIS.
- Communications issues including technology and social networking (e.g., facebook) were discussed. It’s important to provide parents with information in places where they go to find it (e.g., churches and doctors).
- The group agreed that a majority of States don’t have a marketing budget. Marketing is the first thing to get cut in a budget.

4. Key Themes and Issues

- We are building QRIS on a limited understanding of how parents make child care decisions and the role of information in supporting that process. Research on both topics is of high relevance.
- We need to understand how parents use information about quality child care while acknowledging that other factors will affect a parent’s decision and respecting that it is the parent’s choice how to use the information they are given.

- Consumer information: Getting information to parents is important, but we are still learning what information, with what level of detail and in which formats, parents find helpful. Most States do not have a marketing budget.
- How parents define quality and how they use information to make child care decisions may or may not be the same.
- Parents care about quality, but the supply doesn't always meet the demand.