

Designing Family-Friendly Consumer Education on Child Care

Introduction

Consumer education efforts are undergoing revisions in response to provisions in the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act of 2014¹ and the 2016 Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) final rule.² Specifically, each State must maintain a website that contains information about child care providers in the State or local area, results of providers' monitoring and inspection reports (including health and safety violations), and lists of resources for parents, including financial assistance.³ This brief provides research-based information to support state agency staff as they design and implement these websites and other resources, such as quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs).

Taking a Family's Point of View

One purpose of consumer education activities and QRISs is to make it easier for families to obtain information that they find relevant to making decisions about child care. From a family's point of view, valuable, trustworthy information can make the search process easier.⁴

The effort families exert in the search and decisionmaking process is shaped by the tools and resources available to them, what they can afford, and what is available in their community. Their perspectives are also influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity, cultural values, housing stability, children's special needs, family composition, employment, and work hours (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010). When designing consumer education, this complexity, including the constraints families encounter in the decisionmaking process, can inform States' work. Supports such as improved search tools or assistance with the search process may be most effective when combined with other system features such as financial resources to improve the affordability of services and supply-building activities to increase the number of options.



¹ 42 U.S.C. § 9858 (2015).

² Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98 (2016).

³ Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33 (2016).

⁴ This brief draws upon a multi-dimensional definition of access that takes a family perspective: Access to early care and education means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs. *Defining and Measuring Access to High-Quality Early Care and Education (ECE): A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers* is a resource to support state policymakers and researchers working with States in developing multiple indicators of access across four dimensions (Friese, Lin, Forry, & Tout, 2017).

Research on Decisionmaking about Child Care

Research findings about how families navigate the process of finding child care arrangements offer a helpful source of information for designing consumer education activities in general and as a component of a QRIS. The findings provide general considerations that States can use to inform goal setting and planning. At the same time, the findings do not represent every racial, ethnic, or cultural group, nor are they representative of the geography of the country. When possible, we encourage additional data collection at the state and local levels to promote a greater awareness of families' unique needs and perceptions. In this brief, we seek to provide meaningful information that will allow state leaders to understand general applicability of the findings while acknowledging that multiple approaches are needed to address families' diverse needs. We explore three key questions:

- ◆ Why do families search for early care and education?
- ◆ How do families search for early care and education?
- ◆ What features do families look for in early care and education settings?

Each key question is followed by a discussion of its implications for state work to support consumer education.

A variety of research studies inform this brief, including findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) and links to the original NSECE research papers. The NSECE is a nationally representative study conducted in 2012 that includes a significant survey of households with children younger than 13 (in addition to surveys of the center-based and home-based workforce). When possible, this brief provides NSECE data for families that differ by income level and race and ethnicity.

Question 1. Why Do Families Search for Early Care and Education?

- ◆ **Employment and supporting children's social-emotional development are the two primary reasons families search for early care and education (ECE).** According to the NSECE (2014), employment is the main reason for child care searches, regardless of household income. Children's educational and social enrichment is the second reason across all household income levels. Nearly half (49 percent) of families with income at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level cited work as their primary reason for searching for ECE, compared with 36 percent of families in the highest income bracket (at or above 300 percent of the federal poverty level). There are few differences in search reasons by race and ethnicity.
- ◆ **Primary reasons for child care search vary by child's age.** According to the NSECE (2014), the majority of families searching for ECE for infants and toddlers (51 percent) do so primarily for work-related reasons. In comparison, only 28 percent of families searching for ECE for a preschool-age child do so primarily for work-related reasons, with 41 percent searching primarily to support their child's educational and social needs.

Design Considerations

The reason families initiate a search for ECE and their family context (for example, their child's age) may shape the timing and urgency of their search. Written materials or website text could address these different reasons and the particular needs families may have.

For example, web links specific to different family circumstances could provide an entry portal through which families begin their searches. This option is in contrast to beginning a search by address or by program type. Based on what we learn from the NSECE, options for text might include the following: "Are you changing jobs?"; "Are you looking for the best educational and social child care or preschool for your preschool child?"; and "Are you looking for child care for your baby or toddler?" Families could be directed to a page with information tailored to their needs (for example, a page with details about the features of care that are important for infants and

toddlers), as well as links to a search tool with filters such as child care quality, hours of services, type of care, and availability of transportation.

Question 2. How Do Families Search for Early Care and Education?

- ◆ The majority of families (63 percent), regardless of income, consider more than one child care provider and make a choice based on information received from family and friends (NSECE Project Team, 2014). The next most commonly used source of information is the Internet, with more than one-third (39 percent) of families reporting that they make their decisions using web-based information (NSECE Project Team, 2014). According to the NSECE, the majority of families who considered more than one child care provider made a choice based on information received from family members and friends. Similarly, though specifics vary by study, other state, multistate, and local research studies have consistently found that most families with low incomes learn about child care providers from friends, family members, and neighbors (Forry, Tout, Rothenberg, Sandstrom, & Vesely, 2013).
- ◆ **More than a third of families consider only one child care provider as part of their child care search; 71 percent of these households have a previous relationship with that provider.** According to the NSECE (2014), considering only one provider is slightly more common among families searching for care for a young child (0 to <36 months, 74 percent) than an older preschooler (36 to <60 months; 68 percent). A literature review reported that most low-income parents perceive having limited child care options and consider only one or two options in their search (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013).
- ◆ **On average, families with low incomes make child care decisions quickly.** In one study of families eligible for child care subsidies in Maryland, 41 percent of parents made choices within one day (Forry, Simkin, Wheeler, & Bock, 2013). In another study of families eligible for subsidies in Minnesota, 82 percent of parents surveyed choose their ECE arrangement within two weeks (Forry, Isner, Daneri, & Tout, 2014). Quick decisions are not necessarily related to parental satisfaction with care. Parents may need to make child care decisions quickly to meet job training or employment requirements or to keep their subsidy benefits or their job if their child care arrangements are interrupted (Weber, 2011).
- ◆ **Families report gathering information on cost and operating hours as well as program content and curriculum.** Among all families with children under 5 that considered more than one child care option, the most frequently cited information that families gathered about the program includes fees charged (39 percent), type of care (36 percent), hours of care (35 percent), content of the program (26 percent), and curriculum or philosophy of the program (18 percent) (NSECE Project Team, 2014). However, there are variations by child age, household poverty status, and community poverty, as discussed below.
- ◆ **Information gathered about ECE varies by child age, household poverty status, and community poverty.** According to the NSECE (2014), families searching for ECE for infants and toddlers (0 to <36 months) are more likely to collect information on fees charged and hours of care, and parents searching for ECE for preschool-aged children (36 to <60 months) are more likely to collect information on the content of the program and the curriculum or philosophy. Compared with families in low-poverty communities,⁵ fewer families in high-poverty communities consider fees (though more consider availability of financial aid), type of care, and content of the program. These findings may reflect a lack of supply in high-poverty communities.



⁵ Low-poverty communities and high-poverty communities are defined in the NSECE using guidelines from the U.S. Census Bureau. Low poverty density is 0–13.8 percent of households under the federal poverty level. High poverty density is more than 20 percent of households under the federal poverty level. There is no additional information available at this time on information gathering by families broken out by race and ethnicity.

- ◆ **Almost half (42 percent) of the time, ECE searches do not lead to a new arrangement.** Additionally, families from the NSECE (2014) that considered only one ECE provider as part of their search are more likely to change providers than those that considered multiple providers (66 percent versus 54 percent). Families searching for a preschool-aged child’s care are more likely to change providers than those searching for a toddler’s care (65 percent versus 54 percent).

Design Considerations

Referrals from family and friends are influential. Web-based search tools and other written information for families could build on these relationship-based factors by promoting sharing of information about ECE via text or social media. For example, web links could encourage families to share the web-based search tools they used, along with what they decided to do.

- ◆ **Texas’s** website includes links to Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and others. It also tracks the number of times that the page has been shared (http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/Search_Texas_Child_Care/ppFacilitySearchDayCare.asp).

Families consider fees charged, type of care, hours of care, content of the program, and curriculum or philosophy of the program as top features when they search. Default settings on a website should be carefully planned so that this information is easily accessible. Several States have an option to narrow the child care search by the languages spoken by the child care provider. The default setting for search results in some States list programs by QRIS level to encourage emphasis on program quality.

Question 3. What Features Do Families Look for in Child Care Settings?

- ◆ **In general, families place a high value on the quality of child care arrangements, but their definitions of quality and aspects of quality they prioritize vary.** In addition, having fewer choices for child care because of factors such as neighborhood supply or cost limits a family’s ability to prioritize quality. Across studies, families’ definitions of high-quality care tend to include both structural features (e.g., provider education, training, and child-adult ratio) and process-oriented features (e.g., health and safety, provider warmth, emotional tone of the setting, activities to support child development, and open communication with the family) (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013).
-
- ◆ **Cost, location, and hours are highly influential in parents’ decisionmaking processes, but quality matters.** Across studies, when asked their priorities for selecting a child care arrangement, most parents report quality features as being paramount (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013). However, practical considerations constrain the extent to which parents can select a high-quality setting: cost, hours of operation, and location are critical in the search process.
 - ◆ **Health and safety of child care arrangements are critical concerns, particularly for families with low incomes.** Focus groups of families in multiple States found health and safety to be a primary concern among families using Head Start, those receiving subsidies, and teen parents (Office of Child Care, 2016). In a recent study of families eligible for subsidies in Maryland, health and safety features mentioned by parents included a clean and hygienic setting free of alcohol, pets, and smoking, and security features to ensure that children were not mistreated or sent home with the wrong person (Forry, Simkin, et al., 2013).

- ◆ **Parents may not be familiar with terms that are sometimes used when describing child care settings.** Findings from a study in Maryland, and focus groups conducted for the Office of Child Care, suggest that parents may not know the meaning of terms like “licensing” and “accreditation” (Forry, Simkin, et al., 2013; Office of Child Care, 2016).
- ◆ **Families have perceptions about different types of child care that are influential in the search process.** Regardless of child age, income, or race or ethnicity, the greatest proportion of families perceive center-based care to be good or excellent for educational preparation and socialization and relative or friend care to be good or excellent for safety, affordability, and flexibility (NSECE Project Team, 2014). Though these patterns hold across child age, there are statistically significant differences in the proportion of parents who endorse each type of care as being “good” or “excellent” when age groups are compared. Specifically, more parents of preschoolers than of infants and toddlers rank center-based care as good or excellent on nurturing, safety, and affordability. Also, African American parents are more likely than White and Hispanic parents to rank center-based care as good or excellent on nurturing and educational preparedness.
- ◆ **Immigrant families’ child care preferences and priorities are influenced by their culture of origin, language skills, and level of acculturation.** A review of relevant studies found families’ culture and level of acculturation may influence their expectations regarding who should be caring for their children, their trust of formal providers, and how their culture should be respected and incorporated into their child’s ECE arrangement (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013). Their culture and language skills may also affect the degree to which they rely on social networks or are able to communicate with an ECE provider (Ray, n.d.).
- ◆ **Parents of children with special needs are attuned to unique features of care needed by their children.** A review of relevant studies found that the ability of these families to develop a trusting partnership with ECE providers is central to choosing an arrangement (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013). Additionally, parents of children with special needs look for specific features of care including “individualized intervention services, specialized equipment, inclusion activities, and trained providers who can administer medication” (Forry, Tout, et al., 2013, p. 21).

Design Considerations

Quality is a high priority to families as they consider their child care options. Families emphasize different aspects of quality—some prioritize the formal qualifications of the child care provider while others place a higher value on the provider’s warmth or the activities she provides. This variation among family priorities must be acknowledged in materials and resources developed for parents so that parents feel validated as they read the materials and can make connections to their own experiences. For example, text may begin with statements such as, “Families looking for child care have many different values. You may be looking for...”

A set of common quality indicators—those included in the QRIS and those not included—could then be available for parents to click and learn more about why the feature is important and how it is addressed in the system (for example, through the QRIS or licensing system). The CCDF final rule requires States to include provider-specific information as determined through a QRIS or other transparent system of quality indicators.⁶ If a feature is not specifically addressed in the system, the resource could provide sample questions or “things to watch for” during the search process.

To acknowledge the different priorities that families place on features of quality, States might consider providing not only a full QRIS rating that aggregates information across features, but disaggregated ratings for each feature. For example, in addition to getting one total rating up to four stars, a program would also receive a rating for staff qualifications, teaching and interactions, family engagement, and administration and management.

⁶ Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a)(3) (2016).

- ◆ **Maryland's** website includes a list of specific quality-related achievements (asthma-friendly child care, health and wellness, quality business practices, cultural and linguistic competency, eco-friendly achievement, and accredited program), in addition to the program's quality level (<http://www.marylandexcels.org/>).

Because concerns related to the health and safety of their children in out-of-home care are salient to families, it may be important to rethink how information related to a program's licensing status and quality rating are shared with families. For example, research suggests that families may not have a full understanding of licensing and what features of an ECE or school-age care setting are addressed by licensing (Forry, Simkin, et al., 2013; Office of Child Care, 2016). Families are thus unlikely to have a full understanding of how licensing and QRIS ratings are connected. States often leave indicators related to health and safety provisions out of their QRISs because these are covered by licensing. Yet this information about health and safety is highly valued, especially by families with low incomes. It may be important to provide families with information derived both from licensing and the QRIS so that parents can see the information that matters to them. Examples are provided below.

- ◆ **South Carolina's** website search results page includes information on the ABC Quality Level as well as information on licensing violations (<http://www.scchildcare.org/>).
- ◆ **Wisconsin's** website links directly to the provider's YoungStar Point Detail report, as well as the licensing inspection report (<http://childcarefinder.wisconsin.gov/Search/Search.aspx>).

Additionally, websites should use clear terminology and include easy-to-access definitions of terms. The CCDF final rule requires that all the information on the consumer education websites be "consumer-friendly and easily accessible."⁷ Also, States are required to post full monitoring and inspection reports "in plain language, or with a plain language summary, for parents and child care providers to understand."⁸

- ◆ Some licensing terms on **Virginia's** website are defined in pop-up windows when the user scrolls over them (<https://www.dss.virginia.gov/facility/search/cc.cgi>).
- ◆ **Texas's** website includes links to a comprehensive frequently asked questions page next to specific terms (https://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/Search_Texas_Child_Care/).
- ◆ **Utah's** website uses plain language and includes explanations of terms below each inspection report (<https://careaboutchildcare.utah.gov/parent/search.aspx>).



Parents may also find it helpful when the website categorizes the severity of licensing deficiencies.

- ◆ **Utah's** website categorizes violations by three levels and includes a clear explanation of each level on each inspection report (<https://careaboutchildcare.utah.gov/parent/search.aspx>).

Finally, particular attention is warranted to address the experiences of families who have children with special needs or who speak languages other than English. The CCDF final rule requires that information on consumer education websites "ensures the widest possible access to services for families who speak language other than English."⁹ It is important to ensure that consumer education and QRIS websites address these families' needs and include materials that speak to them.

⁷ Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a) (2016).

⁸ Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a)(4) (2016).

⁹ Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98.33(a) (2016).

- ◆ **Pennsylvania's** website includes several specific special accommodations for parents to select from on the child care search webpage including, for example, adaptive equipment, seizures, and chronic physical illness (<https://www.compass.state.pa.us/Compass.web/ProviderSearch/Home#/AdvancedSearch>).
- ◆ **California's** child care resource and referral network representatives work individually with families applying for child care assistance to understand their specific needs and to find appropriate child care as well as other community resources and income supports.

Summary

The research findings summarized in this brief offer families' perspectives on the search for early care and education. The findings highlight the diversity of the perspectives and experiences families bring to the search process, but also identify key commonalities that can inform how States address consumer education strategies that meet families' distinct needs. The Child Care Training and Technical Assistance website contains additional resources about consumer education at <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/topics/family-engagement-and-consumer-education>.

References

- Chaudry, A., Henly, J., & Meyers, M. (2010). *Conceptual frameworks for child care decision-making*. ACF-OPRE white paper. Retrieved from the Administration for Children and Families website: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/conceptual_frameworks.pdf
- Child Care and Development Block Grant Act of 2014, 42 U.S.C. § 9858 (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2015-title42/html/USCODE-2015-title42-chap105-subchapII-B.htm>.
- Child Care and Development Fund, 45 C.F.R. § 98 (2016). Retrieved from https://www.ecfr.gov/cgi-bin/text-idx?SID=4f7ade0a312b92f614ef180b7bbbec06&mc=true&node=pt45.1.98&rqn=div5#se45.1.98_133.
- Forry, N. D., Isner, T. K., Daneri, P., & Tout, K. (2014). Child care decision making: Understanding priorities and processes used by low-income families in Minnesota. *Early Education and Development*, 25(7), 995–1015.
- Forry, N. D., Simkin, S., Wheeler, E. J., & Bock, A. (2013). 'You know how it makes you feel': Low-income parents' childcare priorities and definitions of ideal high-quality childcare. *Journal of Children & Poverty*, 19(2), 107–126.
- Forry, N. D., Tout, K., Rothenberg, L., Sandstrom, H., & Vesely, C. (2013). *Child care decision-making literature review*. OPRE Brief 2013-45. Retrieved from the Administration for Children and Families website: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/child_care_decision_making_literature_review_pdf_version_v2.pdf
- Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N., & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and measuring access to high quality early care and education: A guidebook for policymakers and researchers*. OPRE report 2017-08. Retrieved from the Administration for Children and Families website: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/cceepra_access_guidebook_final_213_b508.pdf
- NSECE (National Survey of Early Care and Education) Project Team. (2014). *Household search for and perceptions of early care and education: Initial findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE)*. OPRE Report No. 2014-55a. Retrieved from the Administration for Children and Families website: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/brief_hh_search_and_perceptions_to_opre_10022014.pdf
- Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2016). *Parent focus group comment summary*. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/occ/family_focus_groups_summary_national_website_and_hotline_2016.pdf

Ray, A. (n.d.). *Parent priorities in selecting early care and education programs: Implications for Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system*. St. Paul: Minnesota Early Learning Foundation. Retrieved from http://closegapsby5.org/files/pdf/Dr_Ray_Study_Parent_Priorities_February_2010.pdf

Weber, R. (2011). *Understanding parents' child care decision-making: A foundation for policy making*. OPRE 2011-12. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

This document was developed with funds from Grant # 90TA0002-01-00 for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, Office of Child Care, and Health Resources and Services Administration, by the National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance. This resource may be duplicated for noncommercial uses without permission.

The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (ECQA Center) supports State and community leaders and their partners in the planning and implementation of rigorous approaches to quality in all early care and education settings for children from birth to school age. The ECQA Center is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families.

National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance

9300 Lee Highway
Fairfax, VA 22031

Phone: 877-296-2250
Email: QualityAssuranceCenter@ecetta.info

Subscribe to Updates
http://www.occ-cmc.org/occannouncements_sign-up/



ADMINISTRATION FOR
CHILDREN & FAMILIES