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Project Title: Examining Parental Child Care Decision-Making: A Mixed Methods Study of Parental Search Strategies

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Project Funding Years: 2019-2021

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Project Abstract:

The proposed project is a mixed methods study that seeks to increase the understanding of the search strategies that parents use to make early care and education (ECE) decisions. Most children under age 5 receive non-parental child care on a regular basis. Although parents have difficulties in finding ECE programs, they typically spend limited time searching for child care and consider only a few options (Forry, Isner, Daneri, & Tout, 2014). Searching for child care is an important part of parental decision-making process. However, little is known about parental search strategies and how they affect parents' ECE decisions.

The proposed project will examine parents' perceptions of different ECE arrangements, their search strategies, and their opinions about consumer education resources. As one purpose of Child Care Development Fund (2016) is to help parents access reliable information to make informed ECE choices, there is a need to gain a better understanding of parental ECE search process.

This mixed method project focuses on parents with children ages 3 to 5. It consists of three studies. Because the type of ECE that parents consider is related to their existing perceptions of different ECE arrangements, the first study will use data from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) to classify parents based on their perceptions of different ECE arrangements and examine whether family characteristics explain the differences in parents' perceptions. The second study will still use the NSECE data to examine the effects of parents' perceptions and search strategies on their ECE decisions. It will highlight how the supply of child care affects the number of ECE options that parents consider and will examine whether the type of information sources affects parental ECE decisions. The third study will collect and analyze qualitative data from parents in Delaware in order to understand the parental search process in more depth. Additionally, this project is built on Weber's (2011) conceptual model of parental ECE decision-making and will add a new construct regarding search strategies to the model.

The proposed project will use both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the following questions:

1. Do parents group into profiles based on their perceptions of different ECE arrangements? And what family characteristics predict the profile membership?
2. What are the differences in family and community characteristics between parents who consider one provider and parents who consider more than one provider during their child care search?
3. How do parents' perceptions of different ECE arrangements and search strategies affect their ECE decisions?
4. Based on parents' profiles, how do local parents make child care decisions? What formal and informal resources do they use?