

**BRIEF | CONSUMER EDUCATION AND
PARENTAL CHOICE IN EARLY EDUCATION (CEPC)****OPRE Report #2025-099**

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How Parents Use Information to Search for, Consider, and Select Child Care and Early Education: Highlights from National Survey Data

In 2019, about 37% of U.S. households with children under the age of 6 years had searched for child care and early education (CCEE) in the prior two years.¹ States have programs to help parents look for and choose care,² however, a recent review of the literature suggests that governments and organizations do not have much evidence to draw on regarding sources³ and types of information that families use when looking for and selecting care (Sandstrom, et al., 2024).⁴ That literature review found extensive qualitative and quantitative research on how parents select care but much less on how parents search for and consider CCEE information prior to selecting. In Table 1, we define three terms used in this brief: “search for,” “consider,” and “select” CCEE.

Table 1. Defining “Search for,” “Consider,” “Select” as related to CCEE

Terms	Definition
Search for CCEE	To seek or receive information or advice about CCEE.

¹ Gebhart, T., Tang, J. & Madill, R. (2024). Parents' Reasons for Searching for Child Care and Early Education: Findings from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education. OPRE Report #2024-064. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

² <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/occ/law-regulation/child-care-and-development-block-grant-act-ccdbg-2014-plain-language-summary>

³ By sources of information, we mean any person, thing, or place that may offer information about CCEE.

⁴ Sandstrom, Heather, Catherine Kuhns, Sarah Prendergast, Teresa Derrick-Mills, and Laura Wagner. 2024. *Parental Search and Selection of Child Care and Early Education: A Literature Review*. OPRE Report 2024-082. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Terms	Definition
Consider CCEE	To review & evaluate information gained or gathered on CCEE options.
Select CCEE	To make a decision about CCEE, such as choosing a new provider, staying with an existing provider, or choosing to have child(ren) receive care only from their parents.

In this brief, we present the findings from a nationally representative survey of parents and guardians⁵ of children under age 6 years but not yet in kindergarten, conducted in 2024 as part of the Consumer Education and Parental Choice in Early Care and Education (CEPC) project.⁶ This survey, referred to throughout the brief as the “CEPC Parent Survey,” sought to better understand the sources of information parents used to learn about CCEE, how they considered the information they had, and the CCEE they selected in their most recent child care decision. Parents who were using nonparental care as well as parents who only used parental care completed the survey (N=2,035). While this brief generally uses the term “CCEE,” the questionnaire used “child care,” so we retain that term when referring to specific questionnaire items or responses.

See the Appendix for more information about the survey.

Searching for CCEE

The CEPC Parent Survey asked parents how they learned about CCEE—both the sources of information and types of information. Parents were able to report about getting information about CCEE in their area whether or not they were actively searching for CCEE.

Sources of CCEE Information

Parents reported using many sources to get information about CCEE. Figure 1 shows the percentage of parents who either got information from each listed source or tried (without success) to do so.

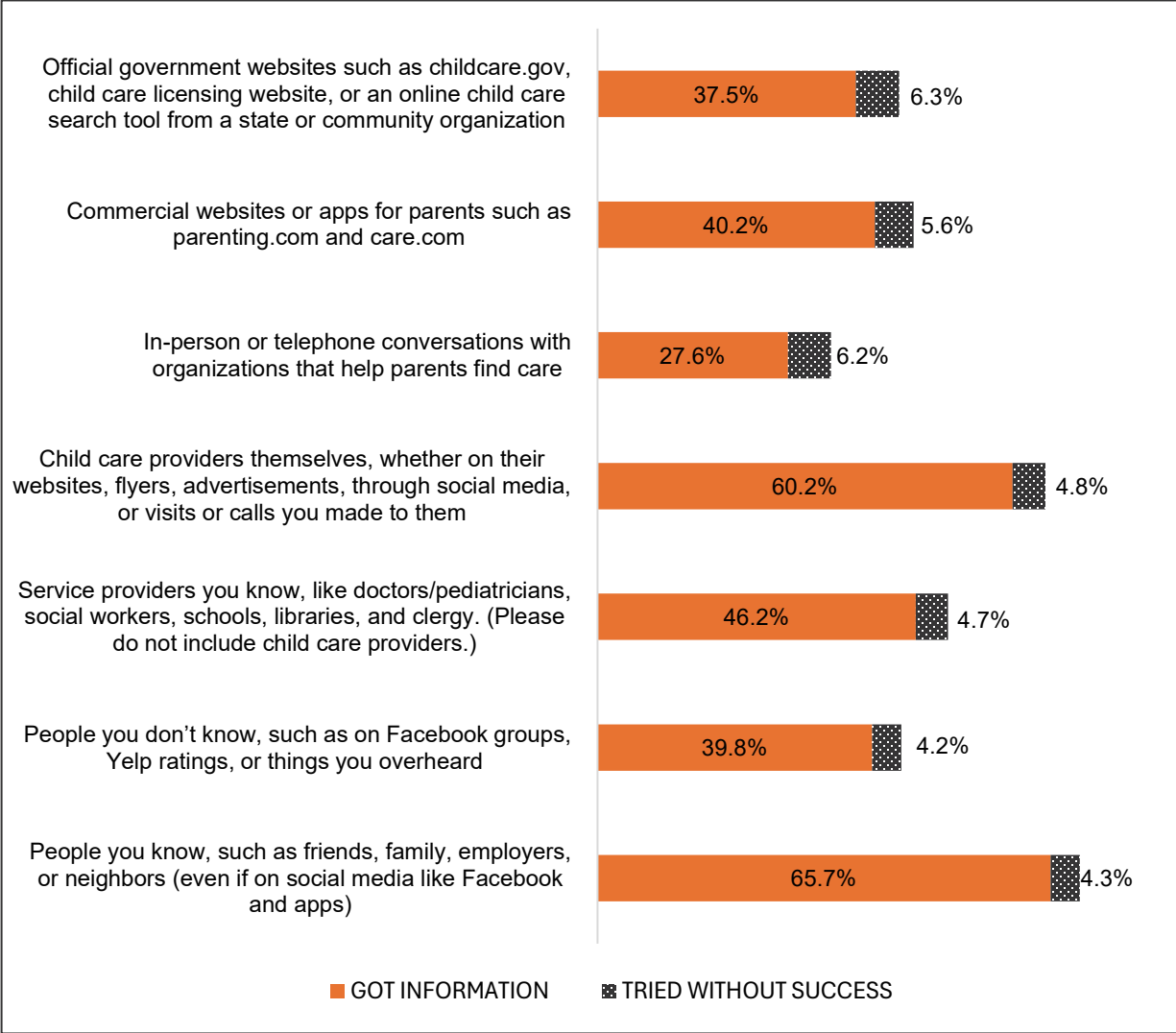
Nearly two-thirds (65.7%) of parents reported getting information from people they know, such as friends, family, employers, or neighbors. More than half (60.2%) reported the child care providers themselves as a source of CCEE information. Many parents (40.2%) reported getting information about CCEE from commercial websites or apps. Official government websites or online search tools from state or community organizations were used by more than a third of parents (37.5%). More than a quarter (27.6%) of parents reported getting information from in-person or telephone conversations with organizations that help parents find child care.

⁵ In this document, we use the term “parents” to refer to a child’s primary guardian(s) including biological parents, parent figures, legal guardians, or other individuals who are making the CCEE decision for the child.

⁶ This report is one of two reports highlighting findings from the CEPC Parent Survey. The other report explores groups of parents who made different child care decisions (for example, choosing a new provider) in relation to their child care needs, use of information, and perceptions of child care options at the time they made their child care decision. *Connecting Parents’ Child Care Decisions with Their Needs, Information Access, and Perceived Child Care Options* is available at <https://acf.gov/opre/project/consumer-education-and-parental-choice-early-care-and-education-2020-2025>.

Parents who reported not getting information about CCEE from a source in the last 12 months were asked if they had tried to get information from that source **without success**. Between 4.2% and 6.3% of all parents had tried to get information without success from each source. For example, 6.3% of parents reported seeking information about CCEE without success from official government websites such as childcare.gov, a child care licensing website, or an online child care search tool from a state or community organization. Combining the parents who got information from a source with the parents who tried without success to get information from that source indicates how many parents consulted that source at all.

Figure 1. Percentage of parents who got information from a source or tried to get information from that source, without success



Note: These are weighted tabulations. N=2,035

The survey also revealed that parents may get information about CCEE even when they are not actively trying to make a decision about child care. Among parents who had not made a child care decision in the past 12 months, the percentage reporting that they received information from a given

source of information in that time ranged from 27.3% who got information from conversations with organizations that help parents find care to 63.0% who got information from people they know.

Types of CCEE Information

A large percentage of parents (80.9%) noted that, of the information they found, information about practical considerations⁷ was most helpful. Practical considerations includes hours and days of care (reported by 56.2% of parents as most helpful), how close a provider is to work or home (48.6%), age groups served (35.2%), and whether a provider is enrolling new children (33.1%). About two in five parents reported that they found information about child care quality (41.6%) or cost (39.5%) the most helpful about child care options in their area (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of parents who found each type of information most helpful about child care options in their area

TYPE OF INFORMATION	% OF TOTAL	SE
Practical considerations	80.9%	1.30
Quality	41.6%	1.60
Cost	39.5%	1.90
Safety	32.1%	1.80
Shared culture and/or values	11.7%	1.20

Note: Table shows weighted percentages and standard errors.
The table only includes parents who reported looking for these types of information in the last 12 months (N = 1,663).
Parents were able to select all that apply, so column percentages will not add up to 100 percent.

Parents also reported what information they had not found that would be most helpful to them about child care options in their area. (Parents could report multiple types of information in response to this question.) When asked about information they did not find, 44.9% of parents reported that additional information about practical considerations would be the most helpful to know about child care options in their area, especially whether a provider is enrolling new children. About a quarter of parents (each) reported that provider quality (27.6%), where they could find care that is affordable (26.6%), provider health and safety conditions (26.4%), and hours and days of care (25.3%) would be most helpful to know about child care options in their area.

⁷ In this brief, we talk about different types of information about CCEE: Each of these is represented by parent answers to a group of responses to the survey question ‘Thinking about any information you have found, what information did you find most helpful about child care options in your area?’. We grouped the types of information parents looked for (before making CCEE selections) into 5 groups, (1) practical considerations (see above), (2) safety (Health and safety conditions at specific providers), (3) quality (Providers that will serve child(ren)’s specific needs and provider quality), (4) cost (Where you could get care that you can afford and Providers that accept child care financial assistance that you qualify for, such as a subsidy, voucher, scholarship, or certificate), and (5) shared culture and/or values (Providers that share your culture or values, such as your language or religion).

Considering CCEE

The CEPC Parent Survey asked parents how much time they had to consider information and make a CCEE decision, and the options they considered. It also asked parents how much they trusted their sources of information and found them easy to use, and whether they felt they had enough information to make a decision. This section examines what parents said about their timeframe, CCEE options, and sources of information. For these analyses, we restrict to the 69.6% of parents who reported that they made a decision about child care.

Amount of Time Parents Spent Considering CCEE Information

On average, parents reported spending 13 hours looking for information to help them make that decision about their child(ren)'s child care. The largest percentage (42.7%) of parents reported having 1-3 weeks to consider information and make a child care decision (Table 3). These are important findings because a 2024 literature review found no previous representative data available on the time parents took to research and make child care decisions.⁸

Table 3. Percentage of parents by the amount of time they said they had to consider information and make a child care decision

Number of Weeks	% OF TOTAL	SE
Less than 1 week	27.5%	1.28
1 to 3 weeks	42.7%	1.50
A month or more	29.8%	1.36

Note: Table shows weighted percentages and standard errors.
This table excludes non-response and is restricted to respondents who made a child care decision (N = 1,449).

Number of New Providers Considered

Parents reported how many new providers they considered who weren't already caring for their children. While considering CCEE options, 45.8% of parents who made a decision considered no new providers, while 54.2% considered one or more new providers (Table 4). Specifically, about a fifth (20.5%) considered two new providers and a similar share (18.6%) considered one provider.

⁸ Sandstrom, et al., (2024).

Table 4. Percentage of parents who considered different numbers of new provider(s)

Number of Providers Considered	% OF TOTAL	SE
No new providers	45.8%	1.67
1 new provider	18.6%	1.39
2 new providers	20.5%	1.34
3 new providers	7.8%	1.01
4 or more new providers	7.3%	0.82

Note: Table shows weighted percentages and standard errors.
The table excludes non-response and is restricted to respondents who made a child care decision (N = 1,451).

Number of CCEE Options that Met Families' Needs

Parents also reported on the number of child care options they had at the time they made their child care decision when considering factors such as schedules, cost, and children's experiences. More than a third (36.5%) of parents reported that they had one option that met their family's needs, while more than a quarter (27.7%) reported they had two options that met their family's needs (Table 5). A little under a quarter (22.5%) of parents reported that they had no options that met their family's needs.

Table 5. Percentage of parents who said they had different numbers of child care options that met their family's needs

Number of Options that Met Family's Needs	% OF TOTAL	SE
No options that met my family's needs	22.5%	1.67
1 option that met my family's needs	36.5%	1.85
2 options that met my family's needs	27.7%	1.42
3 options that met my family's needs	8.1%	1.08
4 or more options that met my family's needs	5.2%	0.89

Note: Table shows weighted percentages and standard errors.
This table excludes non-response and is restricted to respondents who made a child care decision (N = 1,450).

Amount of Information at Time of CCEE Decision

Another aspect of the consideration process is the amount of information and the quality of information that parents may have when making a CCEE decision. Nearly two-thirds (64.8%) of parents reported that they had enough information at the time they made their care decision, while 30.9% said they had some, but not enough, and only 4.3% said they did not have much information at all.

CCEE Sources that Parents Trust or that have Easy-to-Find Information

Parents were asked to rate each of the sources of information about CCEE. Figure 2 shows variation in levels of trust in different sources of information. Nearly half (48.3%) of parents reported that they “very much” trust information from service providers they know. Thirty-nine (39.5%) percent of parents reported that they “very much” trust official government websites, while 28.5% of parents reported that they “very much” trust commercial websites or apps. Less than a fifth of parents (18.2%) reported that they “very much” trust people they don’t know.

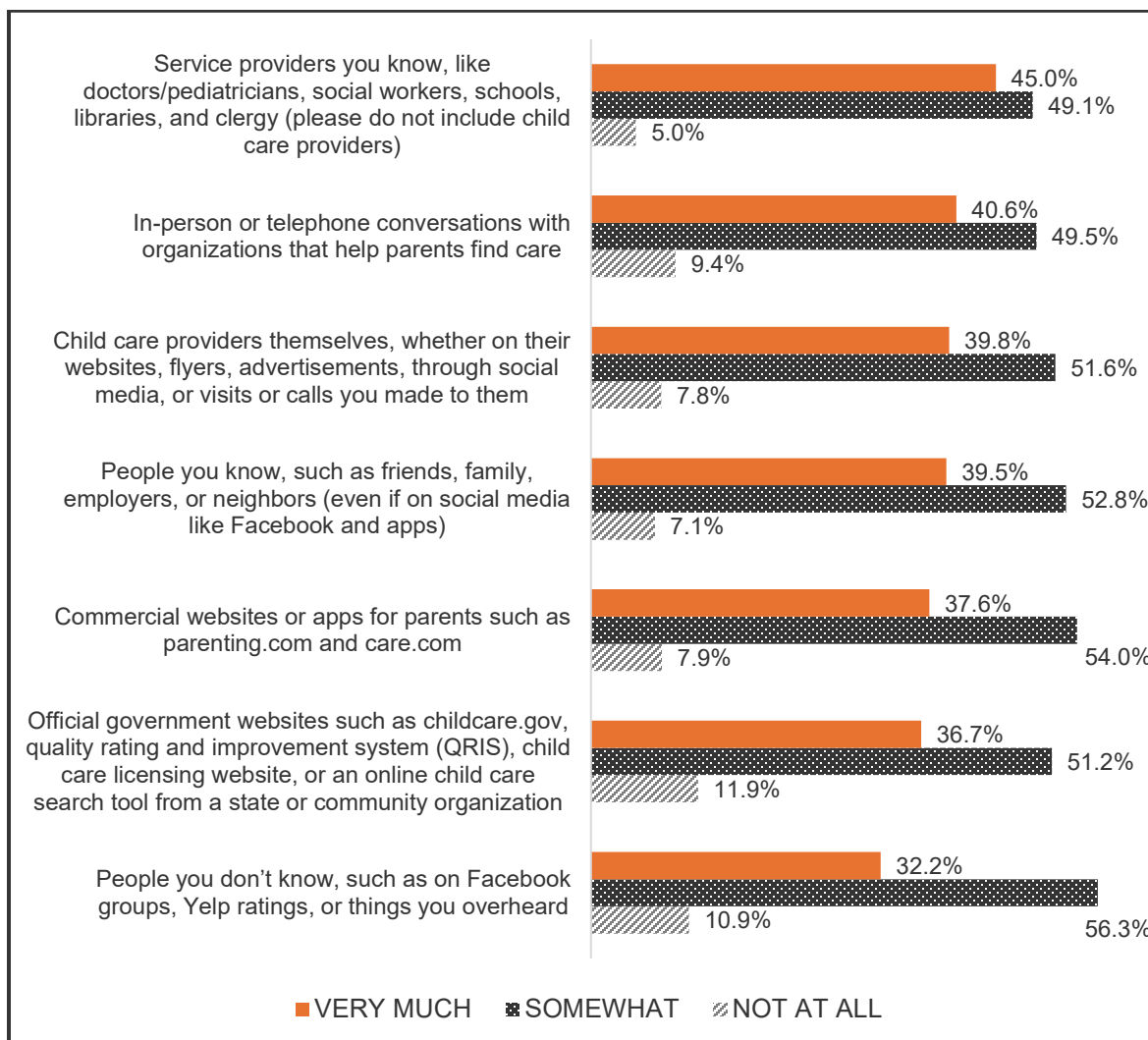
Figure 2. Parents' levels of agreement with the statement, "I trust the source," by source of information



Note: These are weighted tabulations. Ratings are reported for parents who found information from a given source or looked for information without success from that source.

Nearly half (45.0%) of parents agreed “very much” that it was easy to find information from service providers they know (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Parents' levels of agreement with the statement, "It has been easy for me to find information from this source" by source of information



Note: These tabulations are weighted. Ratings are reported for parents who found information from a given source or looked for information without success from that source.

Selecting CCEE

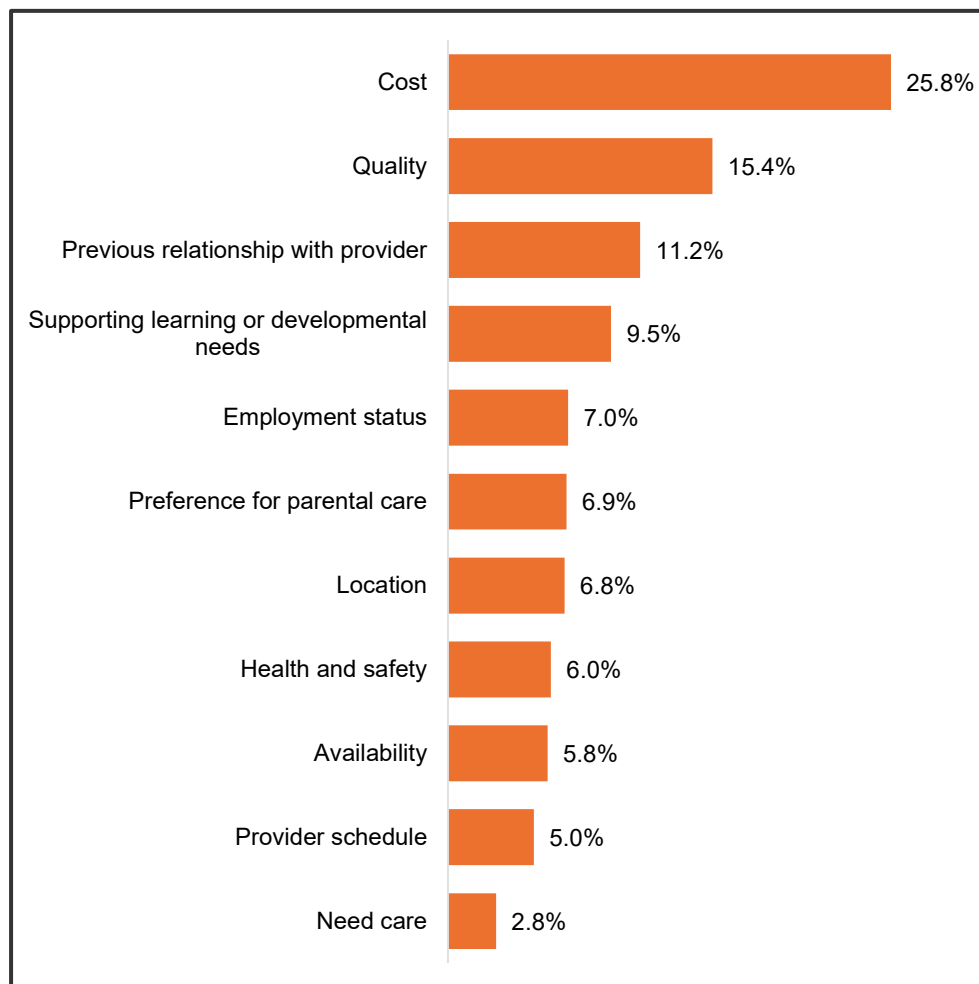
The CEPC Parent Survey asked parents the reason for their most recent child care decision, and how their decision impacted work and family life, as well as their satisfaction with available CCEE options. This section presents findings on each of these parts of the CCEE selection process.

Among parents who made a child care decision, 36.0% decided to stay with an existing provider, 35.3% decided they and/or their spouse/partner would care for their child(ren), and 28.6% chose a new provider. For information about the differences in information use among parents making different child care decisions, see the brief *Connecting Parents' Child Care Decisions with Their Needs, Information Access, and Perceived Child Care Options*, available at <https://acf.gov/opre/project/consumer-education-and-parental-choice-early-care-and-education-2020-2025>.

Main Reasons for CCEE Decision

Parents reported different main reasons for making their care decisions, as shown in Figure 4. Specifically, about one in four (25.8%) parents reported cost as the main reason, while about one in six (15.4%) reported quality. Fewer than one in ten chose each of the practical considerations commonly reported during the search and consider phases (e.g., hours and days of care, how close a provider is to work or home/location, and whether a provider is enrolling new children/availability).

Figure 4. Parents' main reasons for making their most recent decision about child care



Note: These are weighted tabulations. Responses are to the survey question: “What was the main reason for making that decision about this/these child(ren)’s care at the time?” Figure 4 shows only respondents reporting that they made a decision about child care (N = 1,338). An additional 19.2% of responses reported “other” main reasons that could not be coded into these or similar larger categories. For additional information about parent child care decisions, see *Understanding Parents’ Child Care Decisions in Relation to Their Needs, Information Access, and Reported Child Care Options* available at <https://acf.gov/opre/project/consumer-education-and-parental-choice-early-care-and-education-2020-2025>.

Changes to Work or Family Situations as a Result of CCEE Decision

Some parents reported having to make one or more changes to their work or family situation as a result of their most recent child care decision. A little over a third (each) of parents reported having to reduce their work hours (38.3%), increase their work hours (34.6%), and/or change their work

schedules (34.7%) as a result of their child care decision. Almost one quarter (23.9%) of parents also reported working from home as a change they had to make. These changes are detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Parents’ changes to their work/family situation as a result of their child care decision

CHANGES TO WORK/FAMILY SITUATION	% OF TOTAL	SE
I or my partner/spouse had to reduce work hours	38.3%	1.79
I or my partner/spouse had to increase work hours	34.6%	1.63
I or my partner/spouse had to change work schedule (e.g., changed shift times)	34.7%	1.63
I or my partner/spouse had to work from home at least some of the time	23.9%	1.79

Note: Table shows weighted percentages and standard errors. Responses are to the survey question “As a result of that decision, did you make a change to your work or family situation?” This table excludes non-response and is restricted to respondents who made a child care decision (N = 1,469). Parents were able to select all that apply, so column percentages will not add up to 100 percent.

Conclusions and Implications for Consumer Education Practices

The findings in this report highlight the sources of information parents use to search for and consider CCEE, as well as parents' ratings of the sources on trust and ease of finding information.

Relationships appear to be essential to how parents get information about CCEE. Parents most often reported getting information about CCEE from people they know, such as friends, family, employers and neighbors, child care providers themselves, and service providers they know such as doctors/pediatricians, social workers, schools, libraries, and clergy. Parents also reported trusting these sources and finding it easy to get information from them. Consumer education providers attempting to increase their outreach may want to work through organizations that parents already consult and trust, such as local service providers and child care providers themselves.

Parents reported that information about practical considerations (such as hours and days of care, how close a provider is to work or home, and age groups the provider enrolls) was very helpful. However, they were unable to find all of the practical information that would have been helpful to them especially whether a provider is enrolling new children and hours and days of care, and also would have found additional information helpful such as provider quality, health, and safety. Varied approaches to consumer education, often customized for parents' needs, may be needed to help parents find the information they are looking for. A first step may be for consumer education providers to focus on

Key Findings

Searching for CCEE

- Two-thirds (65.7%) of parents reported getting information from people they know, such as friends, family, employers, or neighbors. Three in five (60.2%) reported getting information from CCEE providers themselves, a source that has not been previously identified in research.
- Of the information parents found, 80.9% of parents reported practical information (such as hours and days of care, how close a provider is to work or home, age groups the provider enrolls, and whether a provider is enrolling new children) as being the most helpful type of information.
- Parents found it harder to find information about provider quality (27.6%), where care is affordable (26.6%), provider health and safety conditions (26.4%), and hours and days of care (25.3%).

Considering CCEE

- Parents spent, on average, 13 hours looking for information. Two-thirds (70.2%) of parents reported having 3 or fewer weeks to consider information and make a care decision.
- When considering options, 45.8% of parents did not consider any new providers, while 54.2% considered one or more new providers.
- Nearly half (48.3%) of parents reported that they “very much” trust information from service providers they know and 39.5% reported that they “very much” trust official government websites.

Selecting CCEE

- About a third (36.5%) of parents reported they had one option that met their family's needs and 41.0% reported they had two or more options that met their family's needs, while 22.5% of parents reported that they had no options that met their family's needs.
- Nearly two-thirds (64.8%) of parents reported having enough information to make their care decision, but 30.9% said they had some, but not enough information.
- Cost (25.8%) and quality (15.4%) were the main reasons for care decisions reported by the highest percentages of parents.

general awareness of their websites and services, which a majority of parents did not report consulting when looking for CCEE information.

CCEE consumer education in every state includes information about the child care subsidy system, including how to apply and how to find a provider. The insights from this brief reinforce the importance of cost-related information for parents. Cost was frequently cited by parents as the main reason for their care decision. Also, cost and “where to find affordable care” were both mentioned as types of information that either were the most helpful (and were found) or would have been the most helpful (but were not found).

Although states provide health and safety information about licensed CCEE facilities, at least some parents who are searching for care reported not being able to find that information.

Many parents reported that they found no options that met their needs. The implications of this finding for consumer education could depend on whether there were local options that parents were not able to find information about. The analysis in this brief does not indicate whether these parents are facing inadequate local supply or whether better information would have helped meet their needs.

The findings provide rich new details on when parents receive information or make decisions. Many parents receive CCEE information even when not directly searching for CCEE. Having readily available information on an ongoing basis may be especially important because the specific search times can be short—just over one quarter of parents had less than a week to search for, consider, and select care, and about two-thirds had, at most, three weeks. Consumer education providers may want to provide different search assistance to parents based on the amount of time available to make a CCEE decision, especially when availability may be an issue, for example, in locations where vacancies may be limited or where parents need to find a provider who participates in the subsidy system.

This report sheds light on where and how parents look for information about CCEE—how much parents trust different sources, how long they have to look for care, how many CCEE options families have that meet their needs, and what types of information parents find most helpful—and advances our understanding of parents’ experiences looking for and finding CCEE. This report complements the prior literature on how parents select CCEE, adding rarely-before documented insights on how parents look for and use information when choosing CCEE. The findings in this report offer insights that can inform consumer education activities that support parents in choosing the child care setting that best meets their family’s needs.

Appendix. About the Data Used in this Brief

Data in this brief come from the CEPC Parent Survey, which was administered using the NORC AmeriSpeak Panel (a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population). Analyses using the data with accompanying sampling weights represent U.S. households with at least one child under the age of 6, but not yet in kindergarten (N = 2,035 parents or guardians). The CEPC Parent Survey asked parents to report on their experiences with finding and/or receiving information about child care, the different types of information about child care they may have looked for and/or found in the last 12 months, as well as information they did not find, but would find most helpful about child care options in their area. The survey also asked parents to report on their most recent child care decision and factors related to their child care search in general. In addition, the survey asked parents to report on the types of child care the household is currently using and general household demographic information. Data were collected between March 28, 2024, and May 13, 2024, and the survey was available in both English and Spanish. Parents could take the survey either by telephone or online. More information about AmeriSpeak is available at <https://amerispeak.norc.org/>.

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Disclaimer

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