

## Research Brief

OPRE Report # 2025-025

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February 2025

# Parents' Experiences with Searching for and Selecting Child Care and Early Education: A Multi-Site Qualitative Study

## Introduction

Parents of young children routinely search for child care and early education (CCEE). Nationally, approximately 30 percent of households in 2019 with a child under six years of age reported searching for CCEE in the past 24 months (Kabourek 2024). Parents arrange CCEE so they can work or attend school and to support their child's learning. Yet searching for and selecting CCEE is often complex. Parents often consider many factors such as their budget and schedule, their personal preferences, and the local CCEE options available to them (Sandstrom et al. 2024).

To help families searching for CCEE, the federal government and state and local agencies offer consumer education. Consumer education provides information about CCEE in different ways so that parents can make more informed decisions. To understand whether consumer education information and resources are developed and shared in ways that best meet families' needs, our

## Key Findings

### Parents reported:

- Having several priorities when searching for and selecting CCEE, with child health and safety, location, and cost mentioned most often.
- Using Google reviews, Facebook comments, Yelp, Google Maps, and state websites to find information on potential CCEE options.
- That physically visiting the CCEE facilities and asking questions in person was the most useful strategy to get good information.
- Valuing recommendations from trusted sources. Although they preferred referrals from family members and other parents with children, they also mentioned valuing government sources.
- The high cost of CCEE and long waitlists as barriers to selecting their preferred CCEE arrangement.

team explored how parents search for and select CCEE and the resources they find most useful.

As part of the *Consumer Education and Parental Choice in Early Care and Education* project, we led virtual focus groups with parents of young children who recently searched for CCEE. They lived in unique community settings across six different locations in the United States, from large cities to small towns and U.S. territories. In this brief, we summarize the experiences that parents shared and the strategies they recommended to help families who are searching for CCEE.

## Primary Goals of Focus Groups

The focus groups were conducted to gather information to better understand:

- When and why parents search for CCEE
- The steps involved in searching for and selecting CCEE
- The supports and resources parents use to search for and make decisions about CCEE given their individual circumstances and local community contexts
- What additional supports parents believe would help them in their search for CCEE

We aimed to gather the perspectives of parents with a wide range of characteristics. Parents in this study lived in both small and large communities, had a range of income levels, and had young children of varying ages.

### About this brief

This brief is part of a series for the Consumer Education and Parental Choice in Early Care and Education Project. The research team conducted six case studies to document the range of consumer education activities that Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) lead agencies have developed to support families who are searching for and selecting child care and early education. The selected case study sites included five states and one U.S. territory of varying sizes, representing both urban and rural settings. As part of the case studies, the project team conducted virtual focus groups with 94 parents of young children who use or recently searched for CCEE. Parents were recruited in Los Angeles, California; Waco, Texas; northern and central parts of Georgia; parts of Minnesota with large Tribal communities; small towns in New Hampshire; and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Focus groups were conducted June through August 2023.

## Methods

We recruited parents who lived in one of six selected locations (Box 1). Only parents who were at least 18 years old, had a child under age six, and were using CCEE or had previously searched for CCEE were eligible for the study. We reached parents by distributing a recruitment flyer with the help of local child care resource and referral agencies or other local groups and community organizations. The flyer was available in both English and Spanish. It listed information about the study and requirements to participate and noted that participants would receive a \$60 gift card for their time.

A total of 94 parents participated in the study. A quarter of participants had an infant under 12 months and focused on searching for infant care, while the rest had an older child between 1 and 7 years old.

Focus groups were scheduled for 90-minute sessions with up to five parents in each group. We conducted one-on-one interviews with parents who could not join a scheduled group or when only one parent attended a scheduled group. In total, we held 35 focus groups with 76 parents (34 in English and one in Spanish) and interviews with 18 parents (14 in English and 4 in Spanish). We collected all data virtually via Zoom and recorded the sessions with the participants' permission.

We fully transcribed recordings, translated Spanish into English, and then coded and analyzed the transcriptions using NVivo® software for qualitative data analysis. Two coders conducted analyses and established procedures to ensure inter-rater reliability.

We note a few limitations of these methods. Although we aimed to understand the range of parents' experiences, this study does not tell us how common these experiences are. Parents in other locations and/or with other characteristics may have different experiences.

Additionally, because the study included only parents who were using or had previously searched for CCEE, it does not reflect the experiences of parents who have never used or searched for CCEE.



### **Box 1. Overview of Participants**

Sample: 94 parents who recently searched for CCEE for a child under six years of age

#### **Number of participants by location:**

- 20 from California
- 15 from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI)
- 19 from Georgia
- 11 from Minnesota
- 18 from New Hampshire
- 11 from Texas

#### **Relationship to child:**

- 81% mothers
- 14% fathers
- 4% other relative caregivers

#### **Race/ethnicity:**

- 33% Black/African American
- 22% Hispanic/Latino
- 21% White
- 13% Asian
- 5% Two or more races
- 4% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- 1% American Indian or Alaska Native

#### **Preferred language:**

- 92% English
- 7% Spanish
- 1% Other

#### **Employment/school status:**

- 66% employed only
- 6% in school/training only
- 4% employed and in school/training
- 24% not employed or in school/training

#### **Other information:**

- 31% receiving child care subsidy
- 35% first-time parent
- 84% using CCEE at the time

# Parents' Circumstances and Priorities When Searching for and Selecting CCEE

## Why did parents need CCEE when starting their search?

To identify the reasons why parents searched for CCEE, we asked them to tell us why they needed CCEE at the time. The most common reason parents mentioned was needing someone to care for their children when they worked or went to school. This reason was shared most often by participants who were single parents and the primary caregiver of their children and by families in which both parents worked.

Other commonly mentioned reasons included: 1) Both employed and nonworking parents often indicated that they chose to send their children to CCEE because it promotes children's learning, development, and independence. 2) Some parents placed their children in CCEE to be with other children and to promote socialization.

**“We started her two days a week in a preschool program ... just to get her some of that academic exposure.” –Parent in New Hampshire**

We also found that parents sometimes searched for CCEE because of specific circumstances, such as a previous provider retiring or no longer providing care due to illness or aging, prompting a search for alternative arrangements. For example, a few parents who preferred having a relative or friend care for their child mentioned that they needed to look for a different provider when their preferred provider became sick or elderly or no longer wanted to provide child care.

**“During my first kid's early stages, my parents were around, so we didn't need child care at the time. My second kid, we needed child care, because they were unavailable, and we had to actually go to work.” –Parent in Minnesota**

## What did parents look for in a CCEE provider?

To better understand parents' experiences in searching for CCEE, we asked them to share what they were looking for in a provider and what information they used to assess those characteristics. Parents cited multiple priorities, but most frequently cited the high importance of the health and safety of the site or provider. Parents noted that health and safety included making sure the provider follows licensing regulations, teachers are trained and certified, and the facility is clean.

**“Mostly, I needed to know just their background, how long they've been in the child care field, if they were CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation]-certified, or if they had knowledge about that stuff ... and their health and safety procedures.”  
–Parent in Minnesota**

Parents often reported assessing safety and cleanliness by visiting and evaluating the CCEE space. They described how feeling comfortable with the physical space and the staff is

fundamental to selecting a CCEE provider for their children. In fact, several parents mentioned rejecting a setting because they did not feel comfortable after visiting.

Practical factors were the next most common aspect parents mentioned when looking for CCEE. These practical factors include finding a location close to work or home and a provider with a schedule that meets their needs. Some parents mentioned how having a short drive from home or work was important in helping them manage their schedules. Some parents highlighted that they looked for CCEE with nontraditional hours of operation that could accommodate their work schedules. These factors were crucial for full-time working parents who needed CCEE that fit their longer schedules, which could extend into early mornings and evenings and sometimes overnight and weekends.

However, parents did not always find CCEE that met all their needs. Some described having to make trade-offs between different practical factors, such as accepting a longer commute in exchange for a CCEE program that offered the flexible schedule they needed. For example, a few parents told us that they selected CCEE that allowed them to drop off their child at different times based on their changing work schedules. Parents reflected on how they had to consider a range of factors and then prioritize some when making their selection of CCEE based on which factors were most important to them.

Beyond health and safety, several parents described specific aspects of quality they looked for in a provider. Parents mentioned quality in various ways, such as when referring to quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) ratings, staff qualifications, and caregiver-child interactions observed during visits.

**“I know the higher the star level, the higher the standards of quality for the daycare. That’s the reason why I put my kids [in our current center].” –Parent in CNMI**

A few parents mentioned searching for CCEE that aligned with their language, culture, and/or racial and ethnic background. For example, a Black parent in Minnesota mentioned she would have preferred to use a child care arrangement that had Black children or staff, as she felt that her child “will be able to grow and have some form of identification.” Similarly, some parents in California and Texas looked for child care with staff who spoke Spanish. These parents mentioned that they preferred to communicate in Spanish with the staff. Moreover, they wanted a child care environment that reflected their community and would continue to hone their child’s bilingual skills.

**“Also, I had questions about the teachers, I wanted to know if they spoke Spanish, so that I could communicate well with them to keep track of my child’s progress.” –Parent from Texas**

## The Search and Selection Process: How Parents Search for and Consider Information to Select a Provider

### What sources of information did parents use?

When we asked parents about the sources of information they used during their CCEE searches, they mentioned various sources. They also recommended ways to improve these

sources, which we describe later in the brief. Parents started their search with what they knew based on past experiences, referrals from family and friends, and seeing CCEE programs in their community. For example, for a few parents, the search started by physically going to a CCEE provider they passed by in their neighborhood or considering providers their family or church members mentioned.

**“In our town that we live in, we have two daycares, and I heard that mostly from friends that have their kids going there and stuff. We went to visit them, too.”**

**–Parent from New Hampshire**

Parents mentioned using word-of-mouth, social media, online resources, community agencies, and their own experiences with their older children as primary sources of information. Trusting the source was fundamental when getting information— parents often mentioned seeking recommendations from trusted sources as a first step in searching for CCEE. Trusted sources included friends, family members, coworkers, and other acquaintances. Notably, parents also cited government sources as trustworthy, although their knowledge about these was not widespread (Box 2).

Several parents used a combination of sources to find and assess CCEE options. These included searching the internet for general information about CCEE and reviews; getting recommendations from coworkers, friends, and social media groups; and physically visiting the CCEE settings that they had seen or heard about. Several parents described a series of steps involving different sources of information they viewed as trustworthy, while also trusting their instincts and level of comfort with the CCEE provider.

#### **One parent's story about using a combination of sources to find and assess CCEE options**

A California parent expressed that their initial perception of the provider was very positive after reading online information. However, the parent ruled out the provider after visiting the setting:

*“For me, it was most useful to see the facility in person, because one of them, I’m thinking of one in particular, it sounded good on the website, and the person I spoke to is really nice over the phone. But when I went there in person, I just did not like how they took care of the facilities. It seemed dirty, and the director was really unorganized. I think until I saw it in person, I didn’t really have a good idea of what actually to expect”.*

Although parents across all six sites repeatedly mentioned referrals and recommendations from trusted individuals when seeking CCEE, other sources that parents used differed depending on their location. Parents in larger urban areas more often described using online searches than parents in smaller towns and rural areas. Parents in smaller towns and rural areas more frequently reported driving around and visiting the CCEE provider.



## Box 2. Parents Report That Trust of Information and Sources Is Very Important

Parents described sources of information they viewed as trustworthy (or not) and why. They emphasized the importance of trust when seeking information and selecting a CCEE provider:

- Many parents followed **recommendations from trusted people they knew**. If a CCEE provider or a resource was recommended by someone they trusted, they considered that information reliable. For example, parents noted they felt comfortable using a CCEE provider recommended to them by a trusted person who had a positive, direct experience with the provider.
- Some parents mentioned that they feel more confident when a **provider is licensed and adheres to state licensing standards**. Parents explained that these standards serve as a benchmark for the quality and safety of CCEE.

“[State licensing] holds centers to a certain level of care, a certain level of quality. I thought, ‘Who better to trust than the institution that’s grading our centers?’ That, for me, held all the weight that I needed.” – Parent in Texas

- Some parents trusted **resources from government agencies**, which they viewed as credible and reliable sources of information about CCEE options and standards that they felt prioritized children’s best interests. Parents mentioned, however, that these resources were most useful if they contained up-to-date information about cost and available openings.

“Government resources are the best—that are publicly available, that are reputable. That is not even a question for me. That’s just my gut instinct.” – Parent in California

- Parents also mentioned the sources they considered less reliable. Several **parents were skeptical of online reviews and social media groups**, although many parents had used these to check for any negative experiences that others had reported. Parents emphasized the importance of critically evaluating these groups’ biases and comparing them with other sources before considering their content reliable.

### Mostly, parents trusted their own instincts:

- When parents were asked about the most important sources of information to use when looking for CCEE, they **emphasized visiting the CCEE settings in person to evaluate their suitability**. Parents emphasized the **significance of feeling comfortable and trusting their instincts** when choosing a CCEE provider. They also reported the importance of being able to ask questions during an in-person visit.

“Go tour. Just get a feel based on you as a mother. We all have that, as a mom, have that feel or that mother intuition.” – Parent in Georgia

“When I did a drop-in, I wasn’t comfortable with how lax their security was. I didn’t like the cleanliness. I didn’t like the lack of hygiene of a couple of kids.” – Parent in Texas

## What factors shaped parents' search and selection experiences?

The steps parents took to search for and select CCEE and their feelings about how easy or hard it was depended on several factors. One key factor was parents' previous knowledge and access to information about CCEE options. For example, first-time parents and those who recently moved to a new location had limited knowledge about CCEE options. These parents often mentioned having difficulty finding information and a provider they liked. In contrast, a few parents described knowing the exact CCEE provider they wanted because of familiarity. These included having used the provider for an older child, having a relative or friend who used them before, or knowing about a provider offered by their church.

**“The daycare that my children are at, we’ve used the same one since we’ve started daycare. I had a family member who went to the daycare first. I liked the way that my little cousin was treated, at the time, and how hands-on everyone was. My family just followed in that direction.” –Parent in Texas**

A few parents mentioned how having a child care subsidy was an important factor for them and made their search easier. They focused their search to providers who accepted subsidies and relied on subsidy office staff to help them identify available providers. These parents were less concerned about the cost of CCEE and finding a provider they could afford. One parent mentioned not knowing about the subsidy program until a friend who is a parent shared that information. While a few parents mentioned that subsidy program led to easier searches when parents qualified, parents who did not qualify saw income restrictions as a barrier. As discussed further in the next section on challenges, families without subsidies considered the cost of care in their decisions and made compromises to seek affordable care.

Parents also described the local supply of CCEE in their area and how that affected their search and selection. For example, they shared comments about the programs available nearby that offered CCEE for children the same age as their child, for families that speak their language, and for children with special needs. Parents mentioned how the number of providers available varied by where they lived, with parents in small towns and rural areas having fewer options. In some cases, they felt their options were sufficient. For example, a few parents described finding and touring multiple available CCEE providers in their area or enrolling their child without any issues. In other cases, parents mentioned having limited options, describing competition with other families for CCEE. For example, some parents indicated that even when they found a provider they liked, they had to continue searching because the provider did not have available space for their child. Other parents described how they had to adjust their expectations and compromise due to the limited CCEE options in their community. Moreover, some parents had trouble finding providers with openings in their area and said they were forced to widen their search to other areas or modify their search.

**“I looked at areas in Pasadena, Monrovia, Duarte. Those are all suburbs, but because the population is so dense out here, there are many options. I know my friends living in other cities more rural didn’t have that same experience. I was able to tour them all within a good two-to-three-week span, because I researched them early, and I was able to get in line and do tours.” –Parent in California**



Parents' stories indicated that the availability of family members to provide CCEE—even temporarily—allowed them to take the time they needed to search for and select a more permanent CCEE provider. Some parents expressed their gratitude for having a relative caregiver available. When they could not find a CCEE provider that met their needs, they stopped searching and relied solely on relative-provided care.

### **One parent's story about finding few options for infant care**

A mother from California searched for center-based infant care close to home with no luck. She initially considered her in-laws as possible care providers but decided that they were too elderly to keep up with the demands of infant care. This led to her broadening her search to include home-based programs and those that were farther away from where she lived. Finally, she decided to enroll her baby in a home setting, although it was not what her family initially wanted: *"We first said we were strictly wanting only a [center] facility type. We didn't want at-home care because we weren't sure. Turns out, there's not a lot of places that take someone so little. Our other choices were at church preschools. We were just like, 'No. Not really.' Then we were stuck. We called around. We Googled. We put our names at so many places. It was crazy. Then, we had to stop and think, 'How far are we willing to drive?' and 'Is this doable for a long period of time?' It's super expensive when they're months [old]."*

## **What challenges did parents face?**

### **Challenges during the search**

As parents described their CCEE search experiences, they commonly brought up the challenges they faced. Some parents mentioned having trouble accessing information about CCEE in their communities. For instance, one mother mentioned not knowing anyone with young children who could guide her. A few other parents mentioned recently moving to a new state and lacking social connections. Similarly, a few first-time parents mentioned not knowing about waitlists and needing to add their names early during pregnancy or right after birth. A few parents had not heard of child care subsidies before they started searching and wished they had known earlier.

During the focus groups, emotional stress and anxiety were common threads in the stories parents shared. This stress and anxiety seemed to be driven by one or more of these reported challenges: parents' concerns about trusting others with their children's well-being, the lack of available quality CCEE, and a sense of urgency in finding CCEE so parents did not lose their jobs or could go back to school. Parents in urgent need of CCEE sometimes told us that they resorted to options that were too expensive for their budget or had to piece together multiple arrangements.

**"I almost got stuck paying \$300 a week, plus giving the place [my subsidy voucher] for child care 'cause I needed it right away. I was on the verge of losing my job if I didn't find child care."**

**—Parent in California**

Parents who faced unique circumstances described different challenges. Parents with nontraditional or long work schedules had trouble finding a primary or secondary provider that could meet their needs for early or late care. Parents who mentioned having multiple arrangements described having to find a new CCEE provider often and, in addition, having to coordinate transportation between programs. Parents of children with special needs reported that many of the child care providers they found were not equipped to handle children with specific medical or developmental needs, forcing them to find other arrangements.

**“Even though they were supposed to be able to handle children on the spectrum with a different kind of behavior and emotional kind of needs, they were telling me they couldn’t do it after two weeks. That really—it made me think that I need to just arrange my schedule, if at all possible, to care for him myself, because I, at this point, cannot find someone who is willing to work with him.”**

**—Parent in California**

Language barriers also presented obstacles for some parents. Parents who preferred to communicate in Spanish faced challenges finding providers who could accommodate their language preferences. Although some parents reported that language differences hindered effective communication with the providers, others felt uncomfortable leaving their children with providers that did not match their family’s cultural and linguistic background.

### **One parent’s story about challenges in finding a provider who speaks their home language**

A mother from Texas mentioned how difficult it is to find CCEE with Spanish-speaking teachers even though they live in an area where Hispanic residents are common. She shared her reflections about one CCEE program she visited.

*I observed the demographics of her staff. She was White. Her office staff person was White. Knowing the neighborhood I live in, I just thought I’d like to see a little bit more staff that are reflective of the community. Because we raise [my child] bilingual, mostly Spanish, and so that’s been very important to me, which is also one of the reasons why I’ve hesitated, too, to put her in a daylong program. Just because that’s a full day of English, which, that’s not what she gets now. I could tell that there weren’t very many Hispanic kids in the program. I think I saw one Hispanic staff person, so that was something that I found a little uncomfortable.”*

## **Challenges during selection**

As parents described their experiences in selecting a provider, they commonly shared how, in the end, they were not able to use the providers they wanted. One of the most mentioned challenges parents faced was the high cost of CCEE. Some parents, several of whom were

first-time parents, reported being caught off-guard by the high cost. Cost was a decisive factor when they narrowed down possible CCEE options; parents mentioned giving up on certain providers due to the high cost. Similarly, parents reported having to reduce the pool of potential providers to those that they could afford. Several chose to care for their children themselves or to rely on a relative or friend for care, because the cost of CCEE was not affordable.

**“After I put our son in daycare and people timidly asked how much I am spending per month for his care ... they would exclaim and be like, ‘Oh, my goodness. You should be getting help. Did you go to so and so?’ I was like, ‘What?’ How would I know what’s out there if I’ve never had to do it? I just wish there was something out there [to help parents].” –Parent in Texas**

In addition, some parents felt that child care assistance programs based on income unfairly exclude families with modest incomes, leaving them to shoulder the expense despite their limited income. Parents who did not qualify for subsidies and other public programs reported feeling discouraged. Some expressed frustration at the lack of affordable options and available services to help pay for care.

**“It was like there was no middle ground. It was either you qualify and it’s a full ride, or you don’t qualify and you have to pay full tuition, and full tuition was just not feasible whatsoever.” –Parent in California**

The limited number of local providers, scarce openings, and long waitlists also made it hard for some parents to select a provider. Parents in small towns or rural areas, specifically, noted having only a few providers in their area, which limited their options. Additionally, parents’ stories indicated that even if they found providers they liked and would choose, the lack of available openings forced them to keep searching. For some parents, the long waitlists even kept them from starting to work. Lack of viable options seemed particularly stressful for new parents. They said they were surprised by the waitlists they encountered and wished they had known sooner about the lack of openings. Yet, a few parents who were aware of waitlists and signed up early said they still had to wait a long time.

**“I applied for daycare when I was pregnant, because the waitlist was so long. Still, [my daughter] is 18 months today, but I haven’t got any spot in any daycare.” –Parent in New Hampshire**

The strategies to deal with challenges were often imperfect

Parents shared some strategies they used to overcome challenges and access CCEE. However, they told us that these were often imperfect or caused different types of challenges.

- Some parents expanded their search to larger geographical areas. However, parents also indicated that this led to a lengthy commute that impacted their daily routines and added to the overall cost.

- Some parents mentioned that they needed to extend their search to different types of providers than they originally desired, such as relative care.
- Parents mentioned putting their names on multiple waitlists to secure a slot—although this came at a cost when nonrefundable application fees were required to get on a waitlist, as one parent in New Hampshire explained.
- Other parents described adjusting or reducing their work hours in some way or even quitting their jobs to care for their children themselves.
- In contrast, the parents who had part-time jobs, worked from home, or were allowed to bring their child to work described having some flexibility in terms of how long they could wait to secure CCEE. These parents could take more time to search or could stay on waitlists longer.

## What supports do parents recommend for improving the CCEE search process?

We asked parents what they would recommend to a friend searching for and selecting CCEE. They made several recommendations, including referring the friend to the provider they use, using specific websites to search, and that they “do their own research.” Several parents stated that the first step is always to check if you qualify for subsidized CCEE, as this would determine which providers you can use since not all providers accept subsidies.

We also asked parents how the search and selection process could be improved. The suggestions were aimed at informing parents about CCEE options and support services, such as consumer education websites, resources on how to access child care subsidies, and information provided during medical appointments. These recommendations aligned with the difficulties that parents mentioned above and reflected their need for easier access to information, including options to reduce out-of-pocket costs. For example, some parents proposed a centralized online platform that would let users conduct location-based searches, view ratings and user reviews, and find availability.<sup>1</sup> Parents also suggested that these platforms could include search parameters that allow parents to search for providers that would meet their specific needs.

**“I wish ... there was a centralized place for us to search. It would be so much easier 'cause it was just a lot of research on our own and trying to pull from whatever websites we can find or wherever we could find information to see what would be a good fit for us.”**

**–Parent in California**

Additional suggestions reflected parents’ need for accessible and early information. A few parents who mentioned challenges when trying to communicate with providers who only speak English suggested that the existing resources be translated into other languages. These parents mentioned that translating into different languages is an important way to

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<sup>1</sup> Notably, government-sponsored child care search websites like the ones parents discussed are already available in all participants’ communities to some extent, though search features vary. These recommendations suggest the importance of community outreach, so parents can become more aware of these existing resources, and of improving existing websites to better meet families’ search needs.

improve the reach of the information to populations who do not speak English. A few parents suggested advertising CCEE information and resources through free community events, parent training sessions, and health care providers. Several parents recommended making information about cost and available financial support more accessible, so that parents would not have to rely on asking individual child care providers or only hearing about it casually from friends. Some parents emphasized the importance of early information about CCEE costs and waitlists. In fact, some suggested incorporating CCEE information into existing health care visits to reach parents during pregnancy.

**“The packet I got [at the birth hospital], I still remember. ... If you wanna get your birth certificate, go to the county records. There’s four pages on that ... but there’s nothing about future child care. I don’t know if it’s a funding thing, I don’t know if it’s the hospital has an oversight, but this would’ve been nice to have years ago.”**

**–Parent in California**

## Conclusions

Findings from focus groups with parents across the six locations provided insights into the CCEE search and selection process from parents’ perspectives. These experiences show the range of parents’ needs, priorities, and challenges when seeking and selecting CCEE for their children. The search and selection experiences also varied depending on their local CCEE availability. Interviews suggest that the availability of openings for their child’s age group and for the child’s or family’s needs made their search more difficult or easier. Notably, there was one point on which most parents agreed: The health and safety of the care environment were the most important factors for parents, even if parents’ definitions of safety differed.

A look into the sources of information that parents used to search and select CCEE provides rich evidence on helpful strategies for consumer education. We found that using online resources to find CCEE was prevalent, suggesting that providing accessible and reliable online information for parents may be especially valuable. Evidence also reveals that parents’ searches benefited from a rich social network that can provide information, previous experience with CCEE search, and knowledge of nearby providers. This means that parents who lack these networks and experience may have more difficulty accessing information and may benefit the most from access to information via government-supported resources. However, parents’ use and knowledge of state websites was limited, which contrasted with their mention that they have trust in governmental sources and that trusting the information source is fundamental. This finding suggests that government-sponsored websites have potential to effectively inform parents, but they still may require more visibility.

Conversations with parents revealed that, even when they found information about CCEE, some parents were unable to access the CCEE they needed or wanted due to the high cost and low availability of openings. This suggests that structural factors related to the supply and cost of CCEE, and not only lack of information, drive the challenges faced by parents. Yet, parents overall expressed desire for more streamlined access to information reflective of their own challenges in navigating the complex CCEE landscape. Parents’ suggestions

revealed that some strategies to better support families could be targeted at increasing awareness of existing resources as early as possible.

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## Acknowledgements

CEPC is a collaborative project conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago and the Urban Institute. We acknowledge the project members who contributed substantially to the development of this work, especially Teresa Derrick-Mills, Rupa Datta, Diane Schilder, and Bobbie Weber.

## Suggested Citation

Betancur, Laura, Laura Jimenez Parra, and Heather Sandstrom. (2025) “How Parents Search for and Select Child Care: A Qualitative Study.” OPRE Report # 2025-025, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

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### Contract Number:

HHSP233201500048I/75P00120F37019

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