

2023

CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE STUDY



Developed for the Kansas Department for Children and Families

Submitted by the Wichita State University Center for Applied Research and Evaluation and Public Policy and Management Center



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) partnered with a team of researchers at the Wichita State University Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE) and the Public Policy Management Center (PPMC) to learn about the needs and barriers for Kansas families related to accessing child care assistance. The study was designed around two components: a survey to collect a broad swath of information, and interviews to dive more deeply into the context of this issue. In total, 770 complete survey responses were gathered and analyzed, along with 12 interviews from caregivers and service providers. Below are some of the key takeaways from what Kansas families shared about their thoughts and experiences with child care assistance.

770

**Survey
Responses**

12

Interviews

It should be noted that many of the barriers and challenges noted by survey respondents and/or interviewees are indicative of larger, systemic issues (e.g., too few child care options in a community, lack of transportation, etc.) that can't be addressed by one entity alone. It is also worth noting that conversations with families across the state revealed that many people either don't have a clear understanding of the services provided by DCF and/or conflate what DCF does with other government agencies, impacting their opinions of DCF. However, the hope is that this feedback will serve as a useful tool in understanding how DCF might increase utilization of the Child Care Assistance Program.



Some families struggle with the application process.

75 percent of survey respondents had applied at some point for DCF Child Care Assistance. Of those, 44 percent of respondents said the process was neither hard nor easy, 37 percent said it was easy or very easy, and 19 percent found it hard or very hard. Some interviewees reported perceiving

the DCF application process as confusing and onerous. Specifically, they noted that using the DCF website for the application process and finding clear information about requirements/instructions for applying was difficult. Another parent, who had a positive view of DCF, shared that uncertainty about DCF services and the application process prevents people from applying, suggesting “there needs to be more education on all the services that DCF provides so that there's not that fear.”



There is an opportunity to raise awareness about the Child Care Assistance Program and its benefits.

For the 25 percent of survey respondents who had never applied for the DCF Child Care Assistance Program, the most common reasons were:

- Not being aware of the program
- Not knowing the qualifications
- Concerns it would be too hard to get assistance

While just over a third of respondents (34.8 percent) felt it was easy or very easy to find child care providers participating in the program, 14 percent felt it was hard or very hard. Almost 22 percent of survey respondents reported not knowing how to qualify or worrying about the difficulty of the application process. These sentiments were echoed in the interviews with parents and providers who had concerns about not being able to find child care as well as the stigma/shame of receiving ‘welfare.’ Also, while not accurate in terms of how the program operates, some families spoke about fears regarding the repercussions of applying (i.e. affecting immigration status). Providing clear directions about what information is required and *how it will be used* might help alleviate these concerns.



Transportation is a barrier to accessing child care.

A relatively large percentage of those surveyed do not have their own car (46 percent). Of those who do not have a car, 63 percent said they do not have access to transportation when needed. While not an issue that DCF addresses directly, this serves as a compounding barrier for accessing child care, especially in rural communities.



Service providers can help with outreach.

In recruiting participants for the survey and interviews, researchers contacted a large number of child care and social service providers. It is notable that a number of service professionals that have regular contact with families that would likely meet eligibility requirements don’t know about the program themselves.



Finding quality, affordable child care is a challenge.

Survey respondents were asked to list the top three most important factors that affect their child care decisions. The most common responses were cost, whether their child likes going, and whether it is licensed.

Affordability came up as a theme across interviews as well. The absence of reasonably priced child care forces parents to make difficult decisions, often causing them to sacrifice valuable employment opportunities to stay at home with their children. While this is an issue larger than just DCF, it is worth noting as this has an impact on not only these families, but the community as a whole.



DCF has made efforts to improve the program, and further opportunities remain to expand/improve reach.

To address these challenges and encourage more parents to apply for assistance, efforts could be made to:

- Work with other state agencies providing public assistance to destigmatize applying for and receiving benefits, as well as clarify individual agency roles and services with the public
- Provide clear information about available programs and eligibility criteria, as well as how to maintain coverage once obtained
- Leverage partnerships with local organizations to increase awareness of the program, as these agencies were called out as key resources where survey respondents reported getting their information about child care
- Emphasize internally the importance of a welcoming environment and treating clients with patience and kindness
- Raise awareness about the benefits of accessing these services
- Look more closely at providers seeing success with the Child Care Assistance Program and investigate how to replicate those experiences for providers and families

INTRODUCTION

The Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF) was motivated to learn about the needs and barriers for Kansas families related to accessing child care assistance. To do this, DCF partnered with a team of researchers at the Wichita State University Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE) and Public Policy and Management Center (PPMC), who designed and implemented a study in the summer of 2023 to investigate the use of DCF's child care assistance program. The study had two components:

- A **survey** to understand:
 - The child care needs of Kansas families
 - Families' knowledge of available resources to assist with child care
 - Barriers faced by families in accessing those resources
- Semi-structured **interviews** to take a deeper dive into Kansans' thoughts and experiences regarding DCF child care assistance services and subsidy program.

This report describes the findings elevated through these efforts.



METHODOLOGY

Survey Methodology



The team of researchers worked with DCF staff to develop a survey that addressed the primary question of why eligible parents may not apply for the Child Care Assistance Program, as well as ways to improve the process for all applicants. The survey was available April 1, 2023 to April 19, 2023. In order to encourage participation, the researchers identified a list of trusted partners

across the state who have contact with families that both likely have child care needs and could qualify for assistance. Those trusted partners were asked to distribute the survey to their various networks. The partner agencies were given a \$100 gift card of their choice for their assistance in distributing the survey.

Participants were asked to give informed consent before responding to any questions and were asked to acknowledge that they were at least eighteen years old. Individuals who participated in the survey were given a \$35 gift card if they completed at least 75 percent of the survey. Safeguards were put in place to discourage repetitive or fraudulent submissions. Screening questions were used to ensure only parents (with children who lived in their home full or part-time) who met the eligibility criteria for the Department for Children and Families Child Care Assistance completed the survey.

In the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Those individuals willing to participate in an interview were contacted via email and/or phone following the close of the survey. Although nearly 200 respondents indicated interest in completing an interview, only six parents actually followed through and spoke with an interviewer. To supplement these interviews, researchers contacted service providers who were familiar with the needs of families eligible for child care assistance. Six additional interviews were completed with service providers. See the Qualitative Interview Methodology section for a complete description of the interview process and participants.

Survey Methodology- Screening Responses

In order to clean data and ensure inclusion of responses only from the intended population, the following steps were taken.

- The calculated number of blanks in each response (128 is zero response; minimum number of blanks to qualify as complete is 96)
 - Removed 136 cases for lack of data
- Reviewed question “Please write the name of the organization that told you about this survey in the space below.”
 - Removed 39 cases for suspicious entries
- Cross-referenced questions “Please write the name of the organization that told you about this survey in the space below,” and “What county does your family live in?”
 - Removed 825 cases where the county selected by the respondent was well outside the area served by the organization. This included instances where the zip code was not in Kansas or the surrounding states.
- After cases were removed as noted above, 57 cases from the originally deployed survey were re-added. (Note: When the survey was originally deployed, it was immediately compromised by fraudulent submissions. Those submissions were reviewed closely and 57 cases were ultimately reincluded. These were all verified based on a match between the identified referral organization and identified county of residence.)
- In total, 1,000 cases were removed from the dataset and 57 cases were added, resulting in a total of 770 usable cases for analysis.
- For the pricing analysis, 31 cases were removed for missing an answer to one or more of the four pricing questions. An additional 60 cases were removed for violating the transitivity of price references, meaning the responses didn’t make sense in this context (e.g., a respondent saying \$300 was too expensive but \$400 is too inexpensive). This resulted in 679 cases being used to construct the pricing curves.

Qualitative Interview Methodology



CARE conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Kansas parents and providers to take a deeper dive into Kansans' thoughts and experiences regarding the DCF Child Care Assistance Program. The primary objective was to gain insight into why eligible families might choose not to apply for or accept this support.

Participants included Kansans who qualify for DCF child care assistance (based on Kansas residency, household size, and income) and child care or social service professionals. Responses were not time-bound, meaning participants could potentially reflect on and share experiences from a number of years ago.

Recruitment efforts began with individuals who had completed a preliminary survey and expressed willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. The following steps were taken to contact potential participants. It should be noted that CARE started with a conservative approach given the large number of survey respondents expressing willingness to be interviewed. As can be seen below, very few out of the large list were actually able to be contacted or willing to be interviewed.

- On 6/26/23 CARE staff emailed 14 people on the list with Kansas area codes but received no responses.
- A second email was sent out three days later, which still received no responses.
- Next, staff called 31 people with Kansas area codes, 14 of which were invalid phone numbers.
- Due to this lack of response, CARE staff sent out an email to all 340 respondents who completed the survey and indicated they would participate in the interview and still received no responses. A large number of the emails bounced back and/or had no phone number attached.
- Next, staff called 77 people from the list; 60 were incomplete numbers.
- CARE staff contacted the original list of organizations that had helped with recruitment for survey and requested that they provide information about how to participate in interviews. Again, there were no potential interviewees gained through this outreach.
- CARE also reached out to a network of early childhood professionals and presented to a large group of Community Health Workers in hopes of identifying additional interviewees. There were no responses from parents after these requests.
- After all of the efforts described above to recruit more parents, a total of six were eventually interviewed and provided with a \$35 gift card incentive for participation.

Because of the limited response from parents for the interview portion of this project, CARE then reached out to organizations across the state to recruit child care and social service providers to be interviewed. CARE focused on providers that would have the most direct contact with families eligible for Child Care Assistance in order to try to gain second-hand perspectives on reasons why families may not take advantage of the benefit. As a result of this outreach, CARE was able to interview six persons who work with families that are eligible for child care assistance. These persons are often in a position to assist families in trying to access resources across a range of needs, including for child care. They all reported having heard from parents regularly about their child care needs and issues.

Ultimately, the 12 interviewees came from across Kansas. However, no one that specifically lived in or served families in Southeast Kansas was interviewed. The following shows the counties/regions of the parents and providers:

- Northeast Kansas: Riley and Wyandotte Counties (2 persons)
- Northwest Kansas: Gove and Thomas Counties (3 persons)
- Southwest Kansas: Ford County (3 persons)
- Central Kansas: Barton and Sedgwick Counties (3 persons)
- Statewide: 1 person

The interview consisted of eight to ten questions, tailored to participant responses, covering topics such as their general knowledge, attitudes, and experiences related to DCF and child care assistance services. Participants were encouraged to share details about their child care situations, any challenges they faced in securing child care, and issues arising from inadequate child care arrangements. Furthermore, they were invited to discuss their perceptions of why some families might refrain from applying for assistance and offer suggestions for enhancing support for Kansas families with child care needs. The interviews were typically around 20 minutes. All interviews were recorded via Zoom and interviewers took written notes. Interviews were divided and conducted by two CARE staff.

Qualitative Analysis

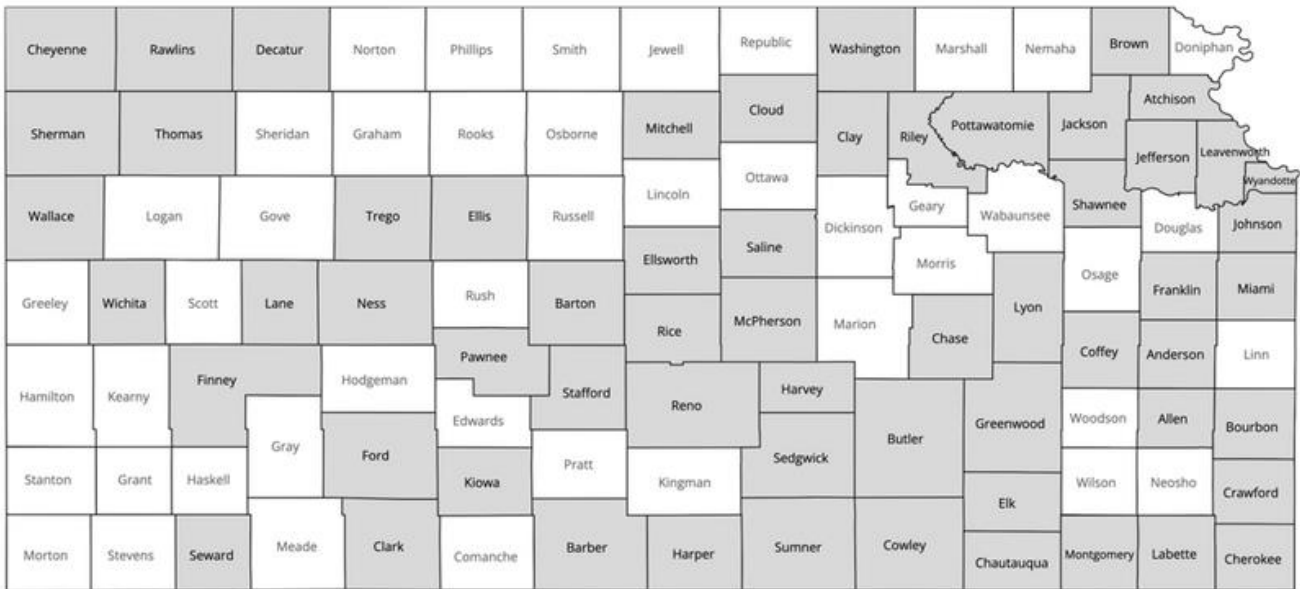
The Zoom recordings and handwritten notes were used to conduct thematic analysis of the comments from all interviewees. One Ph.D. level researcher that had also conducted interviews reviewed all recordings and notes and then developed the major themes, noting specific comments that fell under each. Another Ph.D. level researcher that had not been involved in the interviews reviewed the notes and themes for alignment and clarity.

SURVEY RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

After screening for accurate and complete responses, a total of 770 surveys were included in the data analysis.

619 of these responses identified the county in which they live, with 60 Kansas counties having at least one response submitted (representing fifty-seven percent of the state).

Figure 1: Map of Respondent Counties Represented



The highest number of responses came from:

- Butler County - 93
- Sedgwick County - 79
- Allen County - 69
- Barton County - 60

Between ten and 25 responses were received from Anderson, Atchinson, Barber, Bourbon, Brown, Chase, Chautauqua, Ellis, Ellsworth, Wichita, and Wyandotte counties. The remaining counties had between one and nine surveys submitted.

FINDINGS



The following section describes what was heard from Kansas families through both the survey and qualitative interviews.

SURVEY RESULTS

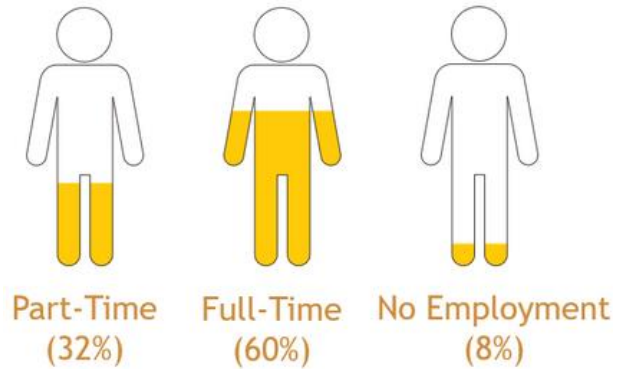
With work and school commitments being primary drivers for parents seeking child care, respondents were asked about the employment status for caregivers in the home. The majority reported they do have part or full-time employment.

Employment Characteristics

Figure 2: Respondent Employment

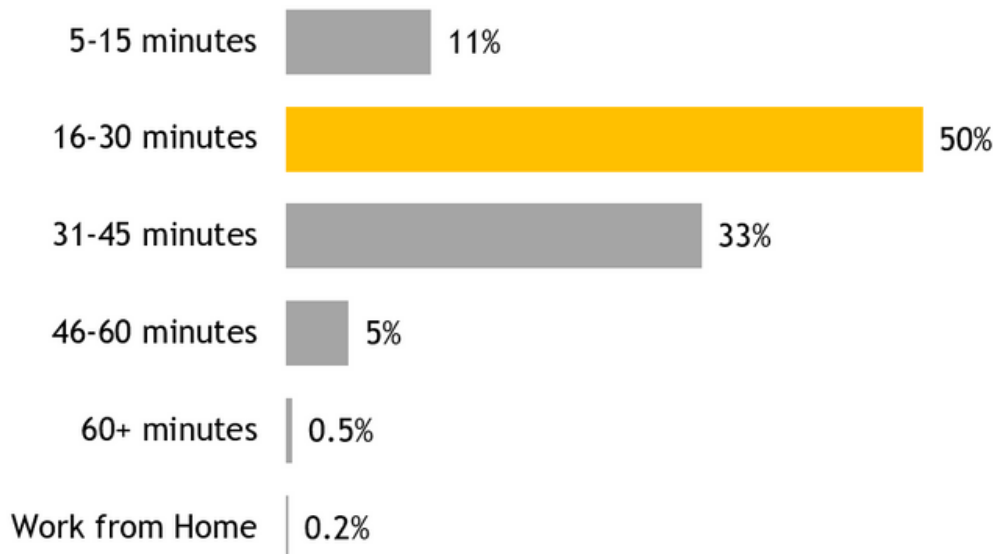


Figure 3: Partner Employment



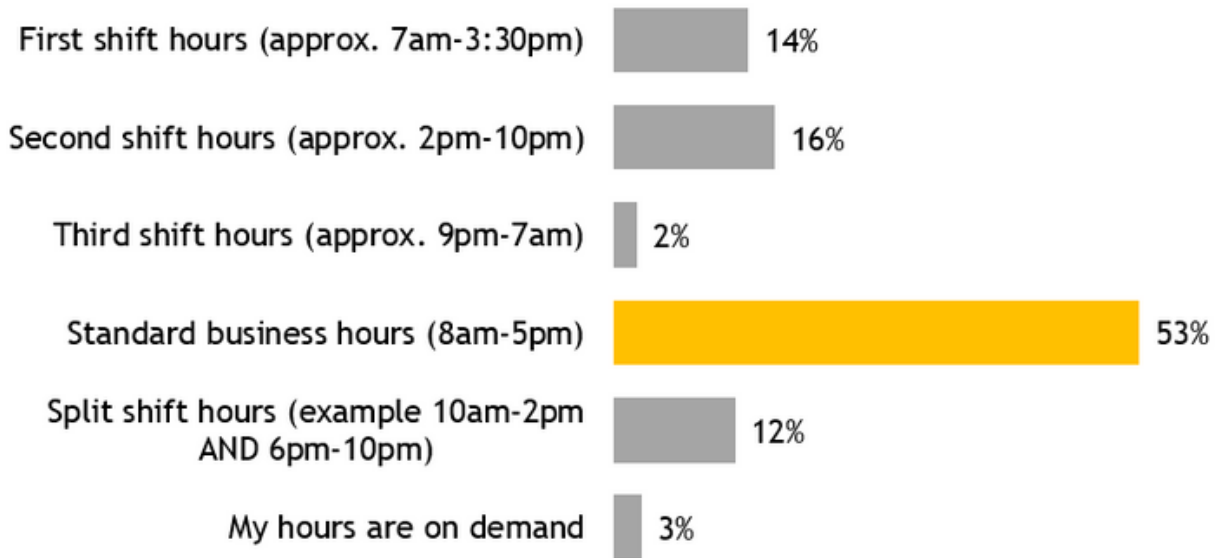
The survey also asked respondents with employment to describe the length of time they must travel to and from work, as this affects the amount of child care needed. Half reported their travel time to work being between 16 to 30 minutes.

Figure 4: Travel Time to Work



Another question asked respondents with employment what hours they work, and if they work part-time to select the time frame their hours are usually scheduled. Over half (53 percent) indicated they work standard business hours (8:00AM-5:00PM).

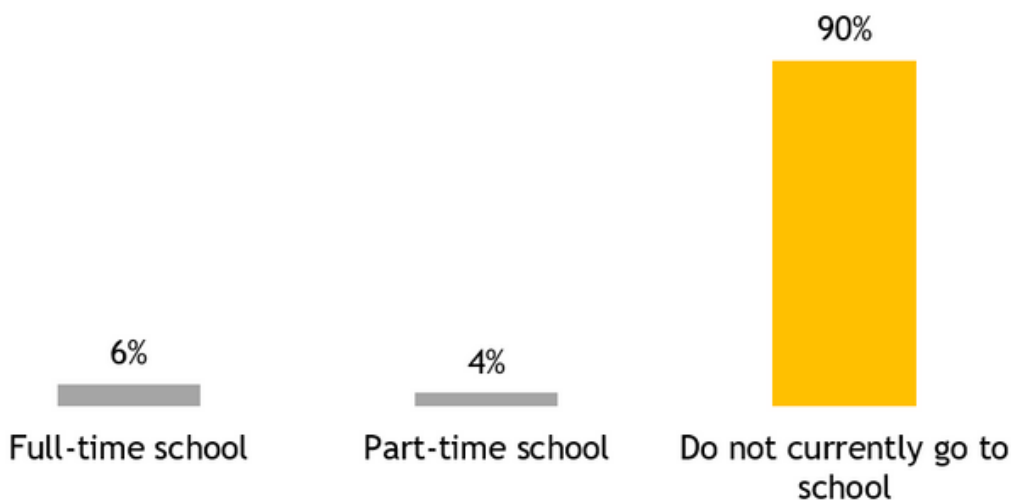
Figure 5: Respondent Typical Work Hours



School Characteristics

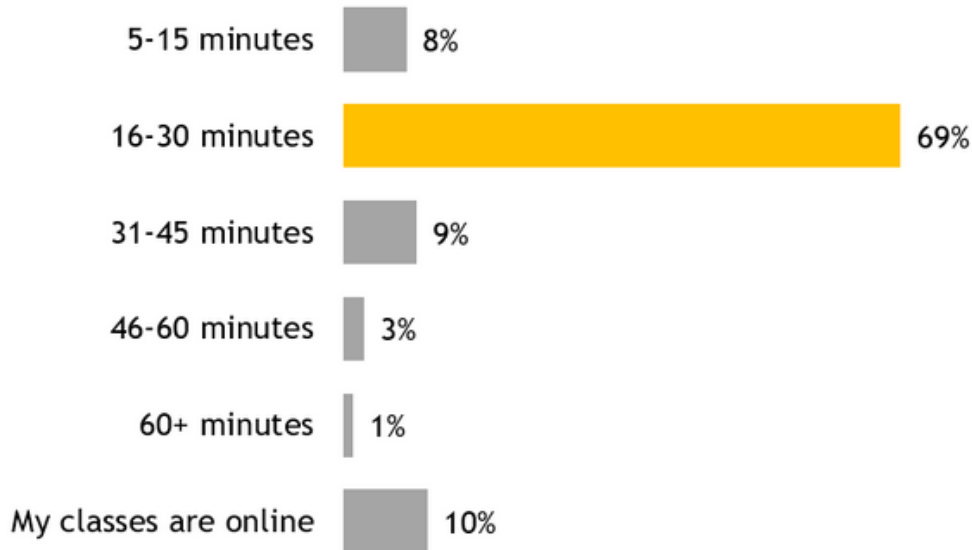
While the majority of respondents reported they do not currently go to school, ten percent stated they do attend school part or full-time.

Figure 6: School Participation



Those who attend school were asked about their typical travel time to and from school. Over two-thirds (69 percent) reported they travel 16 to 30 minutes.

Figure 7: Average Travel Time to School



Respondents were asked what hours they usually go to school, and if class schedules change what hours are the most frequent. Similar to the responses regarding work hours, most (68 percent) indicated they go to school during standard business hours (8:00AM-5:00PM). The next most frequent response at almost 20 percent was morning to mid-afternoon (approximately 7:00AM-3:30PM), followed by early afternoon to late evening (approximately 2:00PM-10:00PM) with 12 percent.



Household Composition

Respondents were asked several questions regarding the composition of their family. The first question pertained to how many children live with them either all the time (full-time) or certain days/weeks (part-time). Sixty percent of respondents reported having one child live with them full-time. No respondents reported having five or more children living in the home.

Figure 8: Children in the Home Full-Time and Part-Time

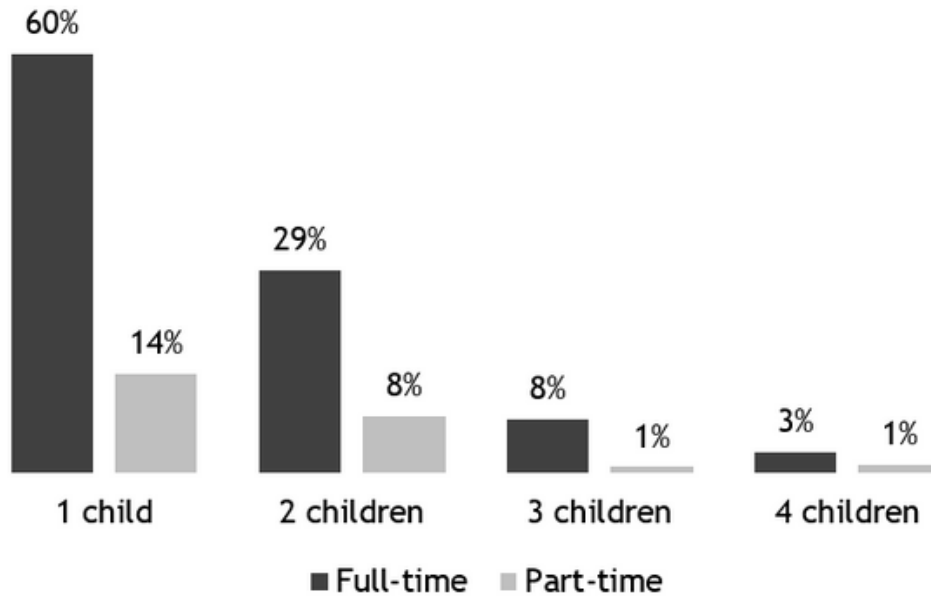


Table 1: Distribution of Children Living with Respondents by Age Group

| Age Group | Number of Children | | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|-------|------|------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 0-12 months | 9.6% | 4.6% | 0.1% | 0.1% |
| 13-18 months | 10.7% | 2.1% | - | - |
| 19 months - 4 years | 39.9% | 4.4% | - | - |
| 5 years - 11 years | 52.8% | 14.6% | 2.2% | 0.3% |
| 12 years - 17 years | 11.6% | 3.8% | - | - |

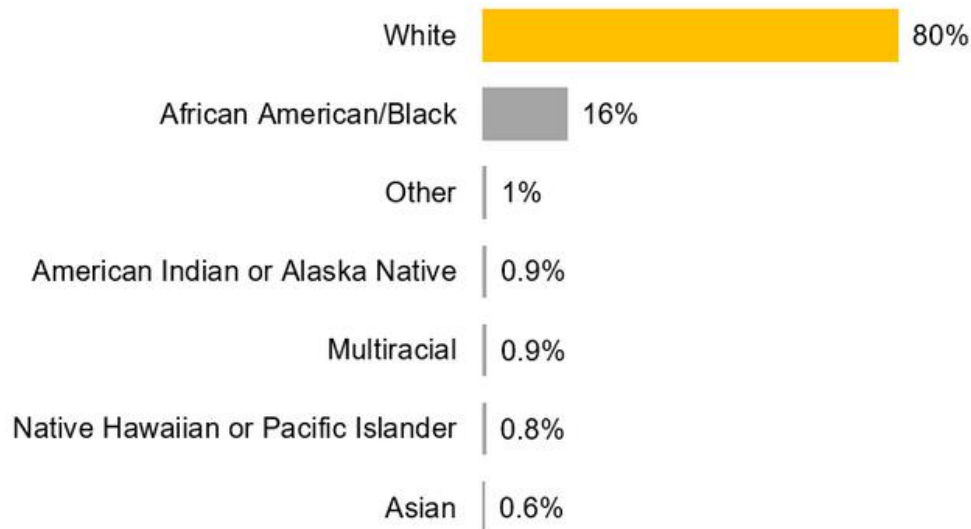
Over three fourths of respondents (79 percent) reported two adult caregivers, defined as a person 18 years old or older, living in the home. Four percent reported having three adult caregivers in the home.

In terms of age of respondents, the majority reported being between 26 and 35 years old (66 percent). Almost a third of respondents fell into the 36 to 45 years old category (31 percent). Another two percent reported being 18 to 25 years old and one percent reported being 46 or older.

Regarding race, individuals who identify as White made up the largest number of respondents (80 percent). African American/Black made up the next largest group at 16 percent, and those identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Multiracial, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander each made up one percent or less of the total responses.

The ethnicity of respondents was largely non-Hispanic (79 percent), while 21 percent reported being Hispanic or Latino.

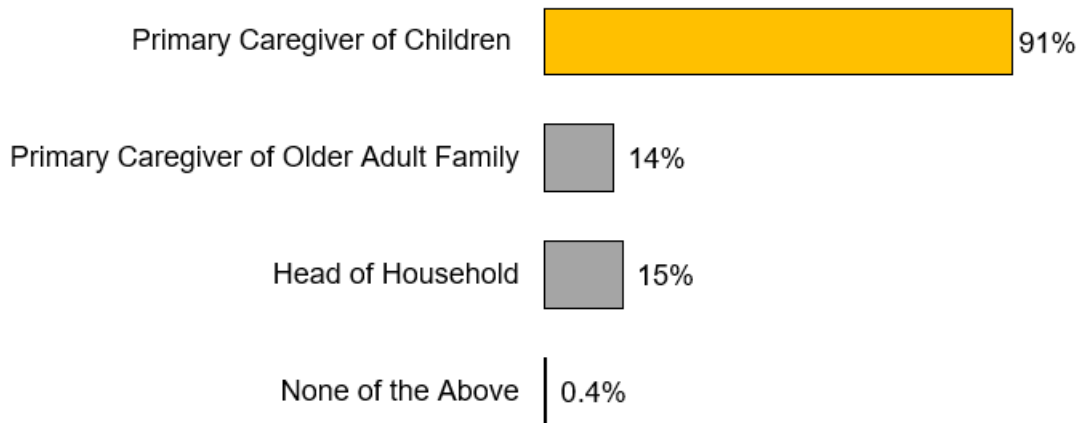
Figure 9: Respondent Race



Regarding gender, the majority of respondents identified as female (71 percent) while 29 percent identified as male. Less than one percent indicated they are nonbinary.

Respondents were also asked to describe their roles at home. They were allowed to select all that were applicable. The majority reported being the primary caregiver of children (91 percent).

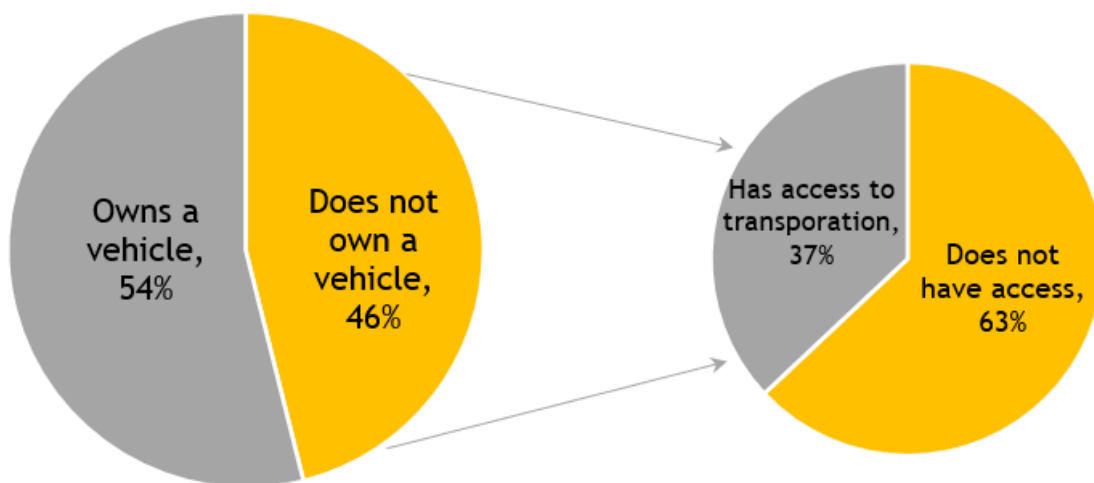
Figure 10: Respondent Role(s) in the Home



Access to Transportation

Transportation often plays a role in a family’s ability to access child care. Accordingly, respondents were asked about their transportation resources. Fifty-four percent indicated they own a personal vehicle, while 46 percent reported they do not own a vehicle. Of those respondents who do not own a vehicle, 63 percent reported not having access to transportation for themselves and/or their family when needed.

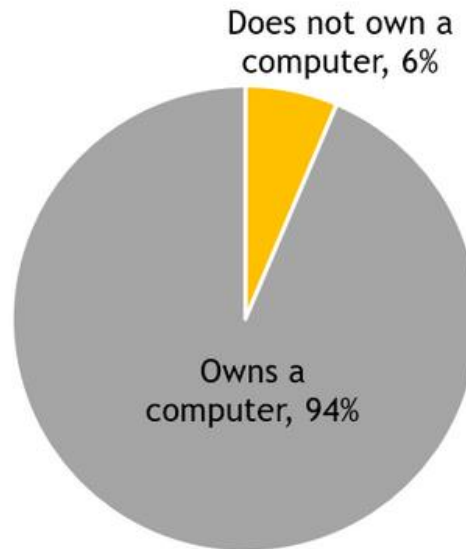
Figure 11: Transportation Access



Access to and Use of Technology

Respondents were asked about their access to and comfort with technology, as this also impacts their ability to find and apply for child care resources. Ninety-four percent of respondents indicated they own a computer. Six percent of respondents stated they do not own a computer, but 65 percent of those households have access to a computer when needed.

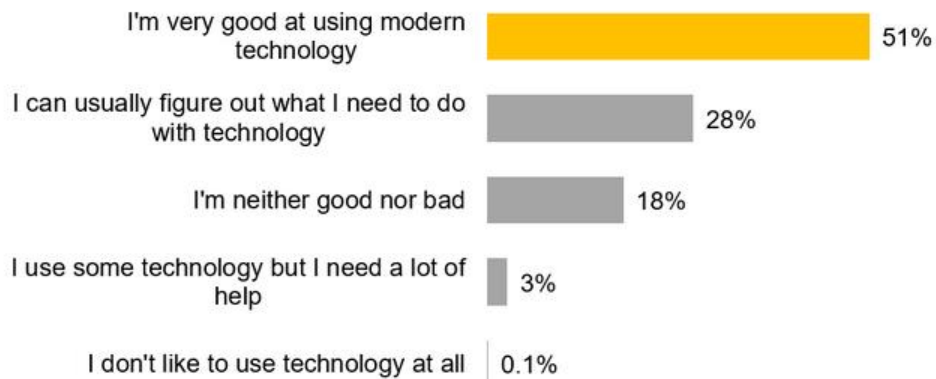
Figure 12: Access to Technology



Nearly all (99 percent) respondents reported owning a smartphone, with only one percent reporting they have some other type of mobile phone.

The majority of respondents also feel comfortable using modern technology. Over half (51 percent) reported feeling they are very good at using modern technology.

Figure 13: Comfort with Technology



The table below examines comfort with technology broken down by age. The majority of respondents in each age range report feeling like they can usually figure out what they need to do with technology or are very good at using modern technology.

Table 2 : Comfort with Technology by Age

| Age group (In years) | I don't like using modern technology at all | I use some technology, but I need a lot of help | I'm neither good nor bad at using modern technology | I can usually figure out what I need to do with technology | I'm very good at using modern technology |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|--|--|
| 18-25 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 50.0% | 50.0% |
| 26-35 | 0.2% | 2.5% | 14.5% | 24.9% | 57.3% |
| 36-45 | 0.0% | 3.0% | 27.0% | 32.1% | 38.0% |
| 46-55 | 0.0% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 25.0% | 50.0% |

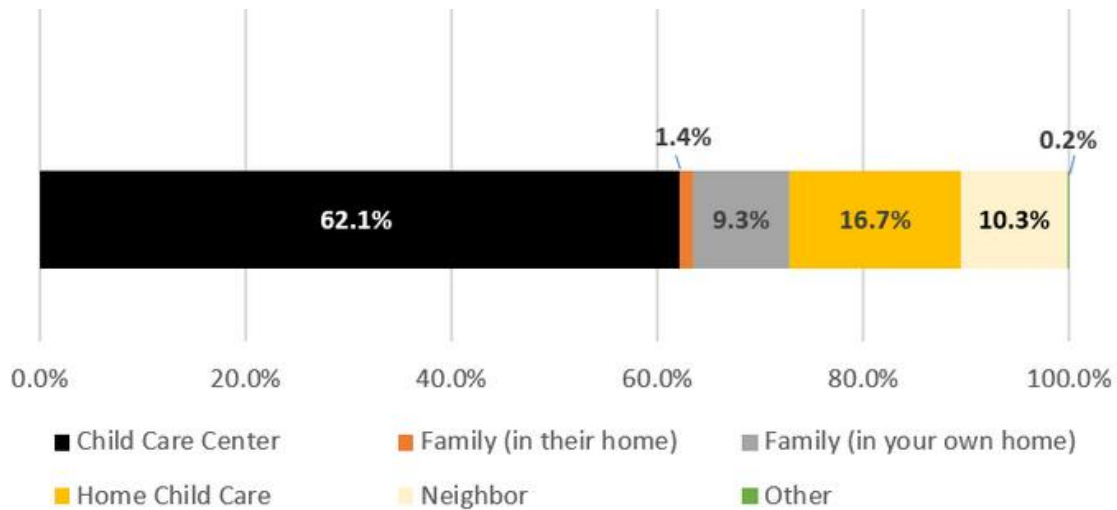
Perceptions about Child Care and Child Care Assistance

Use of Child Care

Over three fourths of respondents (78 percent) reported using some kind of child care for their children. Just over a fifth (22 percent) reported they do not use any kind of child care.

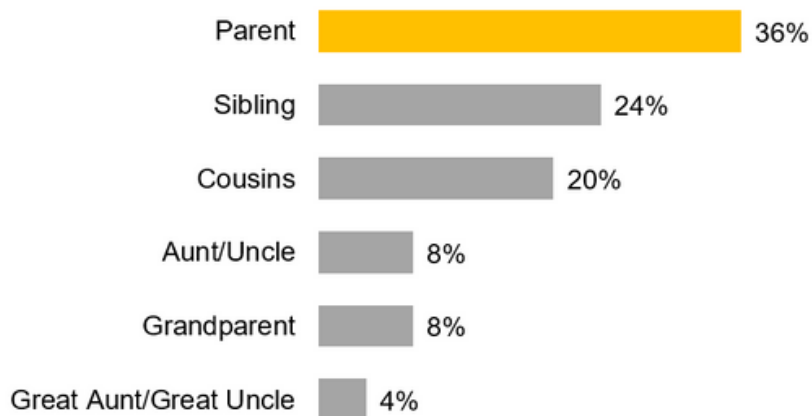
Of those that use child care, the majority (62 percent) use a child care center most frequently. The next most common response was in-home child care.

Figure 14: Type of Child Care Used Most Frequently



For respondents who reported having family members provide care for their child/children, a parent is the most common (36 percent) followed by sibling (24 percent).

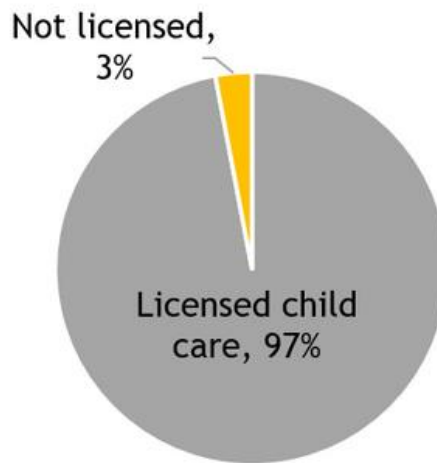
Figure 15: Family Caregiver Relationship



Licensed Child Care

Most respondents (87 percent) indicated they know whether the child care they use most frequently is licensed. Only 12 percent reported they did not know, and even fewer (just over one percent) indicated they were unsure. Of those who reported knowing if their child care was licensed or not, the majority (97 percent) reported it was licensed, with only three percent reporting it was not.

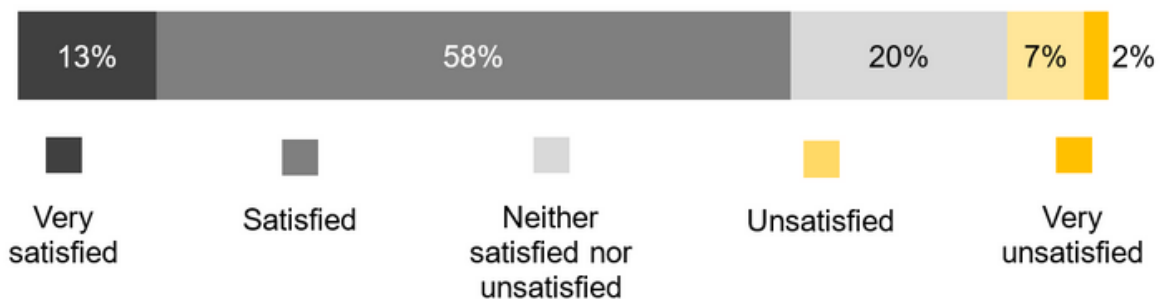
Figure 16: Licensed Child Care Usage



Satisfaction with Current Child Care

Most respondents who use child care reported they were either satisfied or very satisfied (71 percent) with their current child care.

Figure 17: Satisfaction with Current Child Care

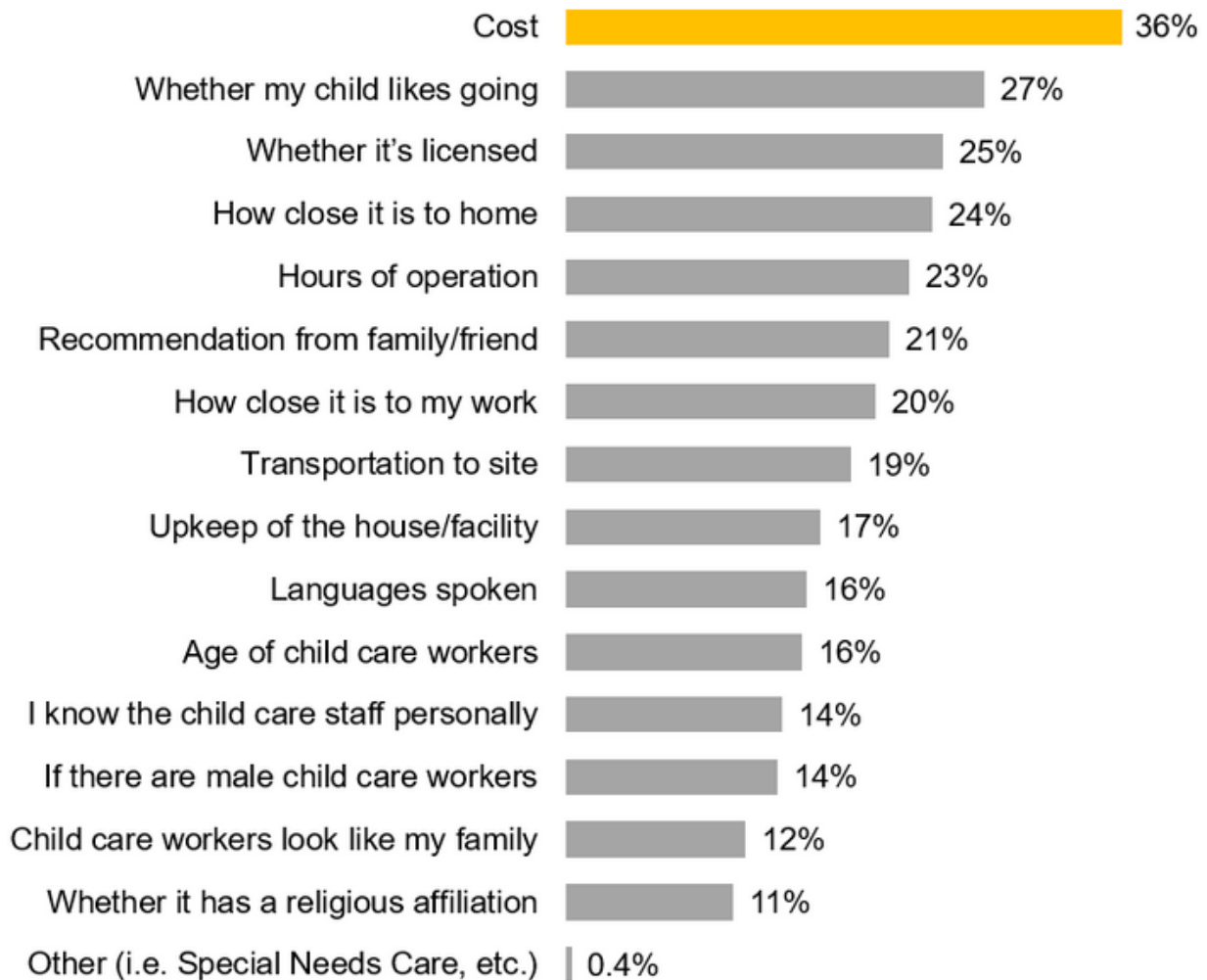


Child Care Decisions

Respondents were asked to identify who typically makes decisions about child care for their family. Nearly all reported it was either the child's/children's mother (63 percent) or the child's/children's father (30 percent). Five percent of respondents indicated decisions were made by the child's/children's grandparent, and only two percent reported decisions are made by another extended family member. Less than one percent (0.3 percent) indicated decisions are made by another non-related caregiver.

Respondents were asked to select the top three factors that are most important to them when making decisions about child care. The top three factors selected were cost, whether their child likes going, and whether it is licensed.

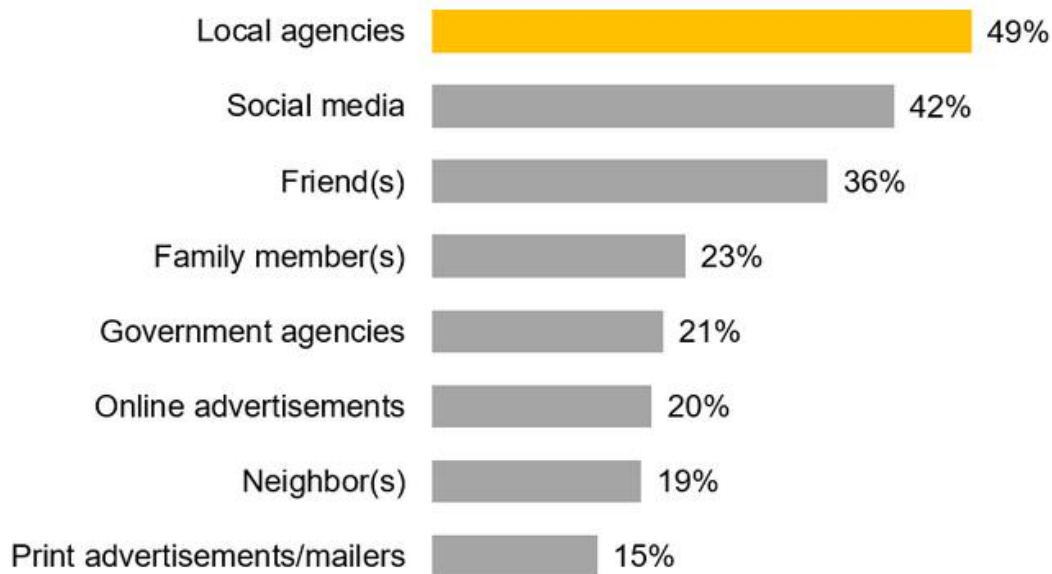
Figure 18: Important Factors for Consideration Regarding Child Care



Information about Child Care

When asked to report where they usually get information about child care, nearly half (49 percent) of all respondents indicated they get information from local agencies (e.g., Child Start, Child Care Aware, etc.).

Figure 19: Common Sources of Information about Child Care



Price

Respondents were asked the following set of questions to understand how sensitive they are to changes in price and how much they are willing to pay for child care:

- At what price (amount per child each week) would you think child care is too expensive to pay for?
- At what price (amount per child each week) would you think child care is expensive but still worth considering?
- At what price (amount per child each week) would you think child care is affordable?
- At what price (amount per child each week) would you think child care is so cheap you would question its quality?

It should be noted that child care costs may vary by city or region. This analysis reflects the general perception across all participants in the survey. Individual perceptions may differ by area of the state.

The answers were used to construct four different curves, where analysis resulted from examining the points of intersection.

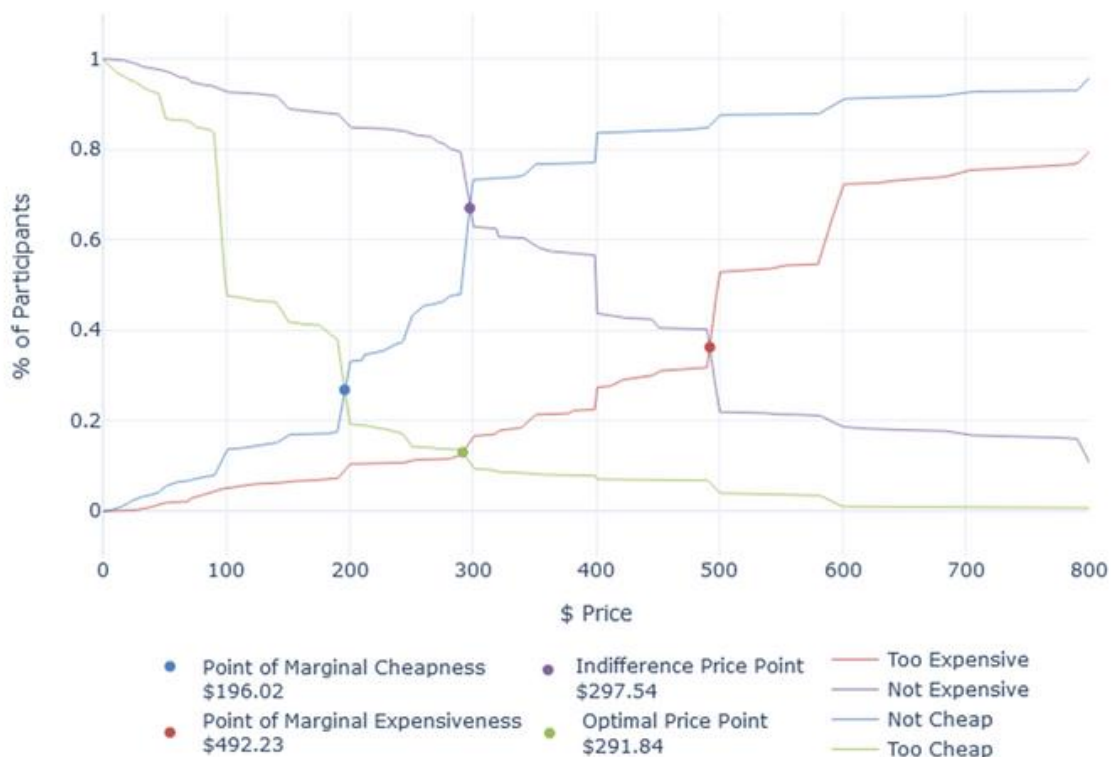
The point of **marginal cheapness**, \$196.02, is the price at which respondents perceive that child care is low in quality. While some respondents may still be willing to obtain child care below this price level, the number of respondents that would be gained from those seeking to land a good deal would likely be outweighed by the number of respondents that would be lost.

The point of **marginal expensiveness**, \$492.23, is the price above which respondents would begin to lose interest in paying for child care. Above this point, most respondents believe that child care is too expensive compared to how much value they gain from it.

The **indifference** price point, \$297.54, is the point at which the proportion of respondents who believe the price is becoming too expensive is equal to the proportion of respondents who feel the price is a bargain. At this point, most respondents are indifferent to the price.

At the **optimal** price point, \$291.84, an equal percentage of respondents believe the price of child care is either too expensive or too cheap.

Figure 20: Price Sensitivity Curves

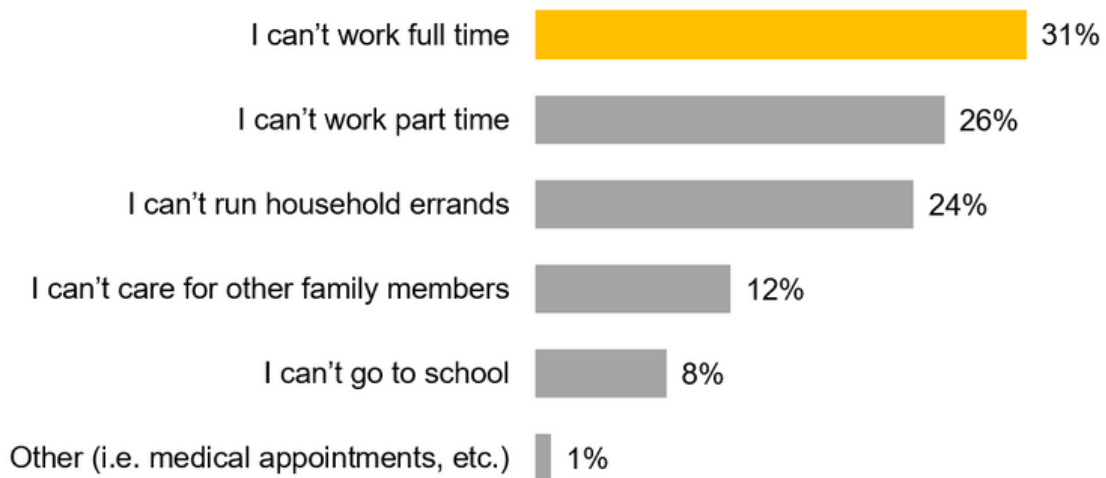


Reliability of Child Care

Respondents were asked if in the last six months, not having reliable child care caused problems for them. Over half (57 percent) said yes, it had caused problems. Forty-three percent reported it had not.

Those who indicated a lack of reliable child care had caused problems were asked to describe the types of problems it had caused. Not being able to work full-time (30 percent) or part-time (26 percent) were the most common issues.

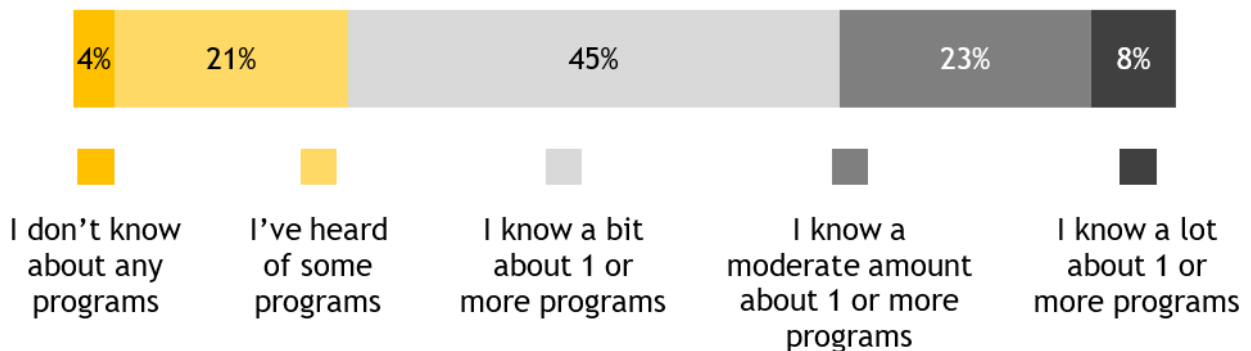
Figure 21: Problems Experienced by Lack of Reliable Child Care



Awareness of Early Childhood Programs

Almost all respondents (96 percent) had some level of awareness of early childhood programs (for children 0-5 years old) in their area.

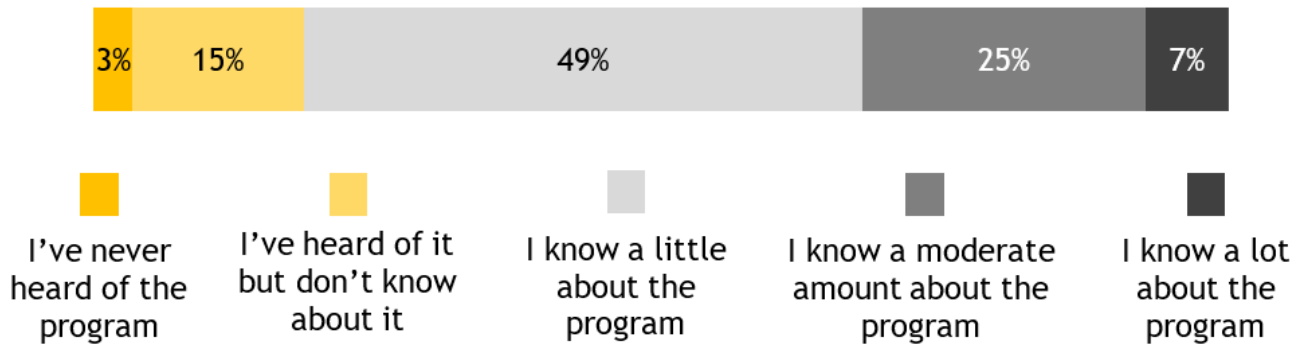
Figure 22: Awareness of Early Childhood Programs



Awareness of DCF's Child Care Assistance Program

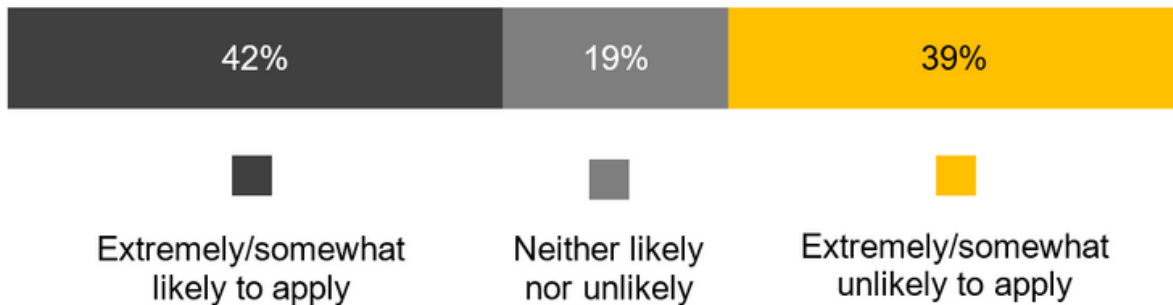
Similar to the level of awareness of early childhood programs, most respondents (97 percent) had some level of awareness of DCF's Child Care Assistance Program.

Figure 23: Awareness of DCF's Child Care Assistance Program



Those who reported they had never heard of the program were asked if now that they were aware of the resource, if they would be likely to apply. Of those respondents, 42 percent said they were extremely or somewhat likely to apply.

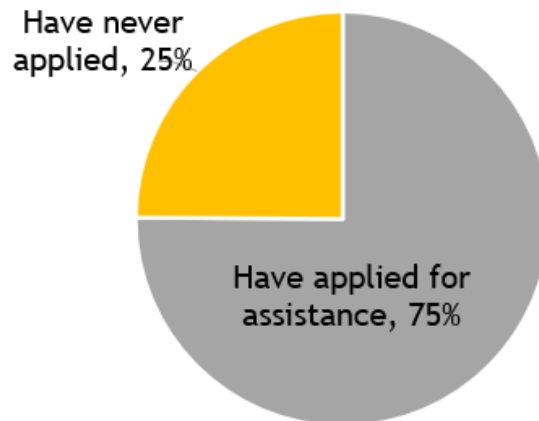
Figure 24: Likelihood to Apply to DCF's Child Care Assistance Program



Experience with Child Care Assistance

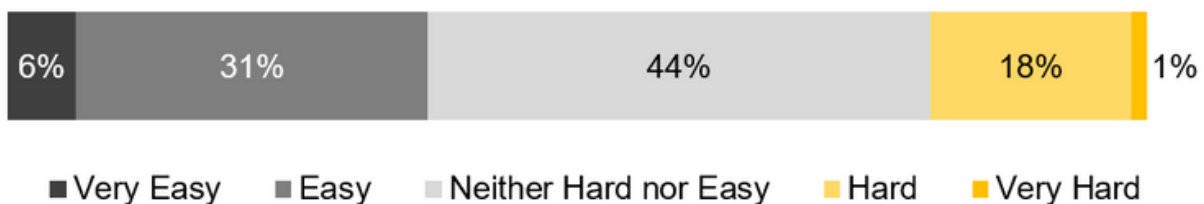
Three fourths (75 percent) of all respondents reported they had applied for the Child Care Assistance Program through DCF at some point. Only one fourth (25 percent) reported they had never applied. Of those who have applied, the majority (84 percent) reported they are currently receiving benefits. Of the respondents who were not currently receiving benefits, almost 60 percent had applied for and utilized them previously.

Figure 25: History of Applying for DCF's Child Care Assistance Program



Those who had previously applied for the Child Care Assistance Program through DCF were asked how hard or easy the application process felt. The largest group of respondents (44 percent) reported it was neither hard nor easy.

Figure 26: Ease of Applying for Child Care Assistance



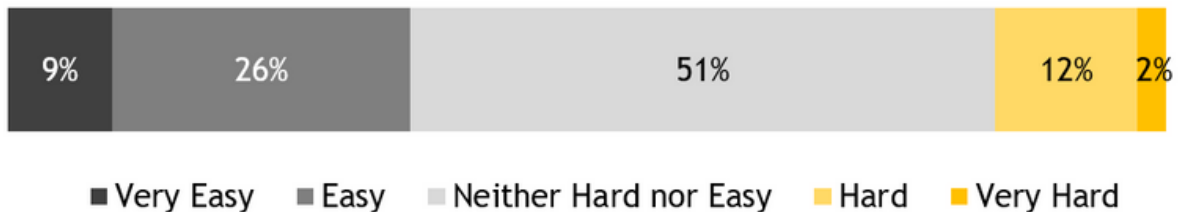
Those who had experience receiving benefits through the DCF Child Care Assistance Program were asked how difficult it was to continue receiving this support once established. Half (50 percent) reported the process for maintaining benefits was neither hard nor easy. Forty percent reported it was either easy or very easy, and around 11 percent stated it was hard or very hard.

Figure 27: Ease of Continuing Child Care Assistance



Those who were either currently receiving child care assistance or had received it in the past were asked how hard or easy it was to find child care providers participating in the Child Care Assistance Program. Just over half (51 percent) said it was neither hard nor easy, while over a third (35 percent) said it was easy or very easy, and close to 15 percent said it was hard or very hard.

Figure 28: Ease of Finding Child Care Providers Participating in the DCF Assistance Program



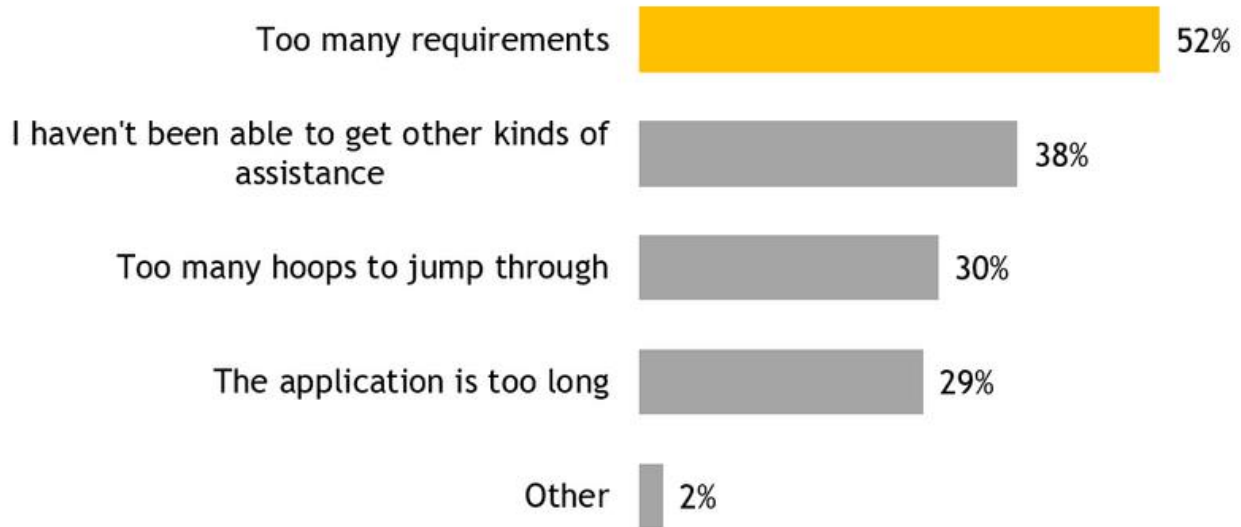
Respondents who had never applied for the DCF Child Care Assistance Program were asked to identify the reasons why. The most common reason reported (27 percent) was that they did not know anything about the program.

Figure 29: Reasons for not Applying to the DCF Child Care Assistance Program



Those who reported they believed that getting assistance would be too hard were asked what the reasons were. Over half (52 percent) said there were too many requirements, and 38 percent said they had been unsuccessful in getting other kinds of assistance.

Figure 30: Reasons for Believing Applying is Difficult



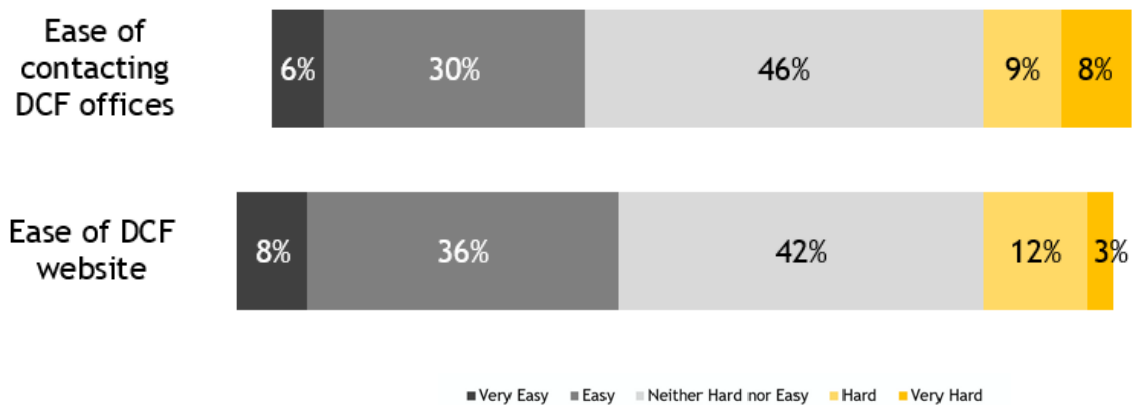
Applying for Assistance

Respondents were asked how comfortable or uncomfortable they were with the idea of applying for child care services on a computer using the internet. Almost half (48 percent) reported they were either comfortable or very comfortable. Forty-one percent indicated they were neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, and another 11 percent felt uncomfortable or very uncomfortable.

Two-thirds (66 percent) of respondents reported they had needed to contact DCF at some point in their lives, while only one-third (34 percent) reported they had not. Of those who had contacted DCF at some point, 36 percent said they found it either easy or very easy.

Eighty-one percent of respondents reported they had tried to use the DCF website to find information about child care assistance at some point. Of those who had used the website, 44 percent found it easy or very easy to find the information they needed. Another 42 percent found it neither hard nor easy, and 15 percent found it hard or very hard.

Figure 31: Ease of Contacting DCF Offices and Using the DCF Website



QUALITATIVE RESULTS

CARE conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 parents and providers to take a deeper dive into Kansans' thoughts and experiences regarding the DCF Child Care Assistance Program. The primary objective was to gain insight into why eligible families might choose not to apply or accept this support.

Qualitative analysis revealed two major themes that shed light on why parents don't apply for DCF assistance: 1) An overall lack of accessible child care; and 2) A perception of a difficult and confusing application process. Other findings regarding why parents don't apply for assistance include a lack of knowledge about services and feeling shame, stigma, or fear about receiving services from DCF. The major themes are discussed below, including more specific details about the comments that fell under each one.

It is important to note that in some instances, the statements made by caretakers and child care providers may not reflect how the DCF Child Care Assistance Program truly operates. For example, one provider noted they prefer not to participate in the program because they can't charge on the days the child doesn't attend, which is inaccurate. It is also worth noting respondents were also not asked to keep a certain timeframe in mind when answering (i.e. "Limit answers to your experiences in the last few years"). As a result, they may have shared outdated perspectives on certain aspects of the program that could have since been updated by DCF. However, the statements quoted here reflect the perceptions of those being interviewed, whether they are right or wrong. This points to another key takeaway from these interviews, which is that misinformation and/or outdated information continues to shape the narrative around the Child Care Assistance Program. Efforts, whether new or strengthened, to update beneficiaries, potential applicants, and providers about the facts related to the program could impact usage.

Lack of Accessible Child Care

The lack of accessible child care was mentioned as the number one issue families with young children face when trying to find child care. Two key barriers are affordability and availability.

Affordability

Parents struggle to find affordable child care, especially in rural communities. The absence of reasonably priced child care forces parents to make difficult decisions, often sacrificing valuable employment opportunities to stay at home with their children.

This predicament is particularly acute for those engaged in entry-level or low-paying occupations, where the net income, after factoring in child care expenses, can be so modest that it seems more practical to forgo work entirely. One mother described it like this: “Child care is really expensive. At some point in my life when I started working, I was like either I work or I take care of my kids, but I can’t do both. If I work, it’s so I can pay child care.” This dilemma underscores the critical need for affordable child care solutions that empower parents to pursue their careers without compromising their financial well-being.

Another single mother in a rural community also reported child care being a stressful issue. She finds child care to be prohibitively expensive in her area. This mother reported having to piece together care for her kids. For example, during the summer she has her landlord (who lives next door) keep an eye on the house, and often relies on her 16-year-old to watch the younger siblings. However, given that the 16-year-old also has a job and the family has only one car, this arrangement is challenging. Transportation issues make trying to juggle child care and employment even more of a challenge. When she needs to travel for work, her kids stay with their pastor. During the school year, she enrolls her children in after-school activities to help cover the time she’s not available, but these activities cost money and further strain her already tight budget. The experience of this one mother is likely reflective of the stress, complexity, and creativity required for many parents who have difficulty finding affordable child care.



Availability

Another critical issue exacerbating the challenges of obtaining child care is the shortage of available child care providers, especially those who accept DCF assistance. Even after successfully navigating the application process, parents report struggling to secure a suitable child care spot, leading to frustration. This issue is particularly pronounced in rural communities, where daycare options are even more limited. Even when child care is available, it often doesn't align with the needs of working families. For example, providers may not offer flexible hours, making it difficult for parents with non-traditional work schedules or those who only require part-time care to utilize the Child Care Assistance benefit.

Parents who cannot secure adequate child care are often forced to make do with less-than-ideal options. A single mother with a full-time job shared her struggle, calling it a child care nightmare: “I am relying on a 10-year-old to watch my 5-year-old son and I come home to check on them multiple times a day in the summer. In the school year I have to modify my work schedules so that I can be off at 3:00 because I can’t get child care. My 5-year-old starts kindergarten soon and I’m relieved because we are past this child care nightmare. You ask anybody in the community and it’s tough. It’s really tough.”

Another parent describes her challenges finding child care: “It’s been a problem since I was pregnant. It’s especially tough finding [child care] for a newborn. We need more state regulated centers. I started looking for child care in my 3rd trimester and thought I found a spot. Then, three days before he was supposed to start, they contacted me and said, ‘sorry the spot isn’t available anymore’ (because the kid they thought was going to move up actually didn’t). So, I was without child care and going to have to quit my job.” Fortunately, she was able to secure temporary child care through a family member for the time being but has yet to find a long-term solution.

Lack of Provider Enrollment to Accept DCF Child Care Assistance

Further contributing to the child care shortage, a substantial number of providers are not enrolled to accept DCF Child Care Assistance. A challenge faced by providers is the cumbersome licensing process, with annual renewals and low reimbursement rates, making it financially strenuous. One provider said child care providers don’t like to accept DCF assistance because they can’t charge on days the child doesn’t attend. While this is not technically true, this perception may shape the narrative passed on to parents and other providers in the community.

While DCF does not currently close cases within the 12-month eligibility period with very few exceptions, one provider expressed concern about her perception of parents being “abruptly cut off from DCF assistance with no prior notice.” This provider expressed frustration because when parents suddenly can’t pay, this forces providers into difficult decisions about whether to continue to provide services, which in turn impacts their own livelihood. Again, this perspective appears to be the result of lingering ideas about how DCF operates. It suggests a need for increased communication about the current policies and procedures.

However, not all providers interviewed had a negative view of DCF services. One provider said that once she figured out who to contact to get started with the enrollment for DCF Child Care Assistance, everything else has been smooth sailing. She says she has not had issues with payments and said it is easy to get paid. This provider's experience is instructive of the importance of clear processes and communication. However, as others have reflected, there remains an intricate web of difficulties surrounding child care accessibility and affordability, particularly for low-income families.

Difficulties for Some with the Application Process

The second most mentioned issue noted by parents and providers is the perception of a difficult and confusing application process. Participants suggest that navigating the system for assistance is a complex and frustrating experience, often leaving applicants feeling that the "juice is not worth the squeeze." According to parents and child care providers interviewed, the process is riddled with numerous hurdles, including extensive and confusing paperwork, inconvenient processes, and unclear deadlines. It should be noted that some of the parents could have been conflating the process for applying for child care assistance with other benefit programs. Again, this is an area where an emphasis could be placed on clear communication related to how child care assistance is a stand-alone program along with the requirements specific to it.

Extensive and Confusing Paperwork

Parents and providers alike mentioned the overwhelming amount of paperwork required to apply. Parents noted feeling discouraged and frustrated by the paperwork to the point they didn't even apply. A child care provider notes how she's seen parents struggle to even initiate the application process because they simply don't have the physical or mental energy: "Parents are overwhelmed. They are in survival mode - they are busy - go, go, go non-stop. [They] just don't have the energy." She says parents do what they have to just to get through the day, and don't have any more to give.



Even well-educated parents find the paperwork difficult. A parent with a college degree describes how stressful the paperwork is: "You have to do a bunch of paperwork and they're like, 'fill out as much as you can' and that's overwhelming, it causes anxiety." Interviewees described the questions on the application as aggressive and intense. A Latina mother describes her experience trying to apply for child care assistance: "I feel like it is hard to work with DCF. I tried to fill out the application, but the questions were too intense." Another mother said, "The questions themselves are hard... People just don't know how to do the application and they fear that the process could get them in trouble."

A single mother in southwest Kansas reports having to take time off from work when she can't find child care. She uses babysitters because child care centers are unaffordable, but says babysitters are less reliable. She has used DCF assistance in the past but said navigating the paperwork was complicated and the various deadlines made it difficult to sustain the assistance once acquired.

Unclear Process and Deadlines

Parents and providers mentioned how unclear deadlines result in the loss of support without warning. Again, this may not be reflective of the actual procedures of DCF. However, the perception remains and should be addressed. One provider described her experience of families unknowingly missing deadlines and being abruptly cut off from assistance. She said, "They don't get the notice until the day before their assistance is cut off and they don't have time to figure out what, when, why? It seems like families don't even get a solid six months of support before something changes and then they're kicked off for whatever reason. It feels like it's every other month for some; every four months for others. It feels like some don't even get questioned within a year; and I feel like some are just attacked...It just feels like the ones that really need it are getting cut off with no notice."

Inconvenient Procedures

Several parents and providers discussed how certain DCF procedures make it harder for some families to apply for and receive services. The most often mentioned issue was completing the application and interviews in-person versus over the phone. Some families need in-person options, especially when there are language barriers or difficulty understanding over the phone. Other families are unable to make it to in-person meetings, especially in rural communities that may not have a local DCF office. One provider described the challenge this presents for one of her families when applying for assistance: “The closest DCF center is 35 miles away. [DCF staff] said, ‘if you can come in person, we can get you approved today.’ But [the parents] work full-time jobs and can’t always get away.”

A parent shared how DCF’s limited office hours posed a problem for her. She needed to do a phone interview but the only times available were during her workday. This is especially a barrier for parents working jobs that lack flexibility. People’s preferences for in-person or phone interviews aren’t always accommodated, which poses an additional challenge, particularly for those in rural communities and with language barriers. Again, this comment reflects an overall perception of DCF that can impact the likelihood of parents applying to any program.



Additional Findings

Other factors that may deter parents from applying for child care assistance were also identified, including stigma and shame, unpleasant interactions with DCF staff, fear of repercussions, and overall lack of knowledge about the program and application process.

Stigma and Shame

Many parents feel ashamed about accepting "welfare" assistance, especially in small communities where everyone's business is well-known. This stigma can deter them from seeking help even when they genuinely need it.

Unpleasant Interactions with DCF Staff

Participants suggested that negative experiences with DCF staff can discourage parents from applying. If they perceive staff as unhelpful or inconvenienced, it can create a hostile environment that dissuades them from seeking assistance. Staff were described as burnt-out, rude, and annoyed. One parent felt DCF staff came across as irritated and inconvenienced when she reached out for help. She explained that, when it is already hard to ask for help, this sort of response by staff made her feel hopeless and discouraged: "[Parents] are already ashamed and embarrassed as hell to call, so making that call is a huge step, and then having them be rude on the other side... [just discourages them]." However, some interviewees said they didn't have any negative feelings towards DCF and never had a problem with staff being rude.

Fear of Repercussions

Some parents fear that involvement with DCF could inadvertently lead to repercussions against their family, creating a significant barrier to seeking assistance. This may be especially prominent in Hispanic/Latino communities where family members may lack citizenship. A mother who identified her family as a Mexican household said her husband, who is a DACA recipient, has been advised against applying for any type of assistance because it might have repercussions on his status: "I've heard that if you apply for like any type of government assistance it can affect your status. I don't know if that's true or not, but I just prefer to stay on the safe side and keep my legal status." For this reason, her family chose not to apply for DCF services at all. This sentiment was echoed by a provider who works with Hispanic families.

Another Latina mother said she stopped filling out the application when she saw questions about child support. She said she and the father have a good co-parenting relationship and that the father "does help me... but the question that asks about child support... like I don't want to get him in trouble... The questions were a little too aggressive and I was like I'm not going to fill it out." When asked what could be done to make her feel more comfortable applying for assistance, this mother said: "If [DCF] will say, 'this will have no [repercussions] to you', then I would consider. And if I could have somebody help me with the paperwork, then I would apply. But just to go in by myself and do it; no, I don't think I would apply."

Similarly, a single mother said she didn't want to apply because she thought it would impact the amount of child support she received, illustrating how the unknowns prevent some families from applying for assistance despite the need for it. Another parent, who had a positive view of DCF, thinks uncertainty about DCF services and the application process prevents people from applying for services, and suggests "there needs to be more education on all the services that DCF provides so that there's not that fear."

Lack of Knowledge

Many parents are unaware of the existence of assistance programs, how to apply, and the eligibility criteria. This, along with not knowing what information is required to apply or how that information will be used, prevents families from applying for assistance. One parent said she didn't know about DCF Child Care Assistance Program until recently completing a KEEP survey, which had information about the program. A Latina mother said, "the families around me don't know about the assistance for child care [and need] more clarity about it."

To address these issues and encourage more parents to apply for assistance, it is essential to destigmatize the process, provide clear and easily accessible information about available programs and eligibility criteria, specify what information is required to apply and how it will be used, and improve customer service to make the application process more approachable and less intimidating. Education and outreach efforts can also help raise awareness about the benefits and ease of accessing these services, ultimately helping those in need receive the support they require.

