



Child Care Preferences: What Families Value When Choosing Child Care

Family Child Care and Beyond: Exploring Targeted Child Care Investments in Rhode Island is a research project led by a partnership between Education Development Center (EDC) and Rhode Island's Department of Human Services (DHS). The project examines financial and professional development supports for child care providers as well as the factors families consider when choosing child care. As part of this project, EDC researchers administered a survey to Rhode Island families asking about parents' experiences with child care and what they prioritize when choosing a program.

When choosing a child care provider, families go through a complex decision-making process and must weigh multiple provider characteristics to arrive at the best available option. The survey posed questions about families' background characteristics and financial circumstances. In addition, the survey used a method called **conjoint analysis**, which has been used in market research to understand how customers value specific characteristics of a product or service. More recently, researchers have used conjoint analysis to understand how families approach child care decision-making.

The survey presented respondents with a choice between two hypothetical child care providers that differed across six key characteristics.¹ Respondents were asked to choose the provider that they preferred in each of four different pairings. Because families chose between a pair of hypothetical providers with different characteristics, instead of simply ranking the importance of those characteristics individually, **conjoint analysis reflects the real-world trade-offs parents face when choosing care for their children.**

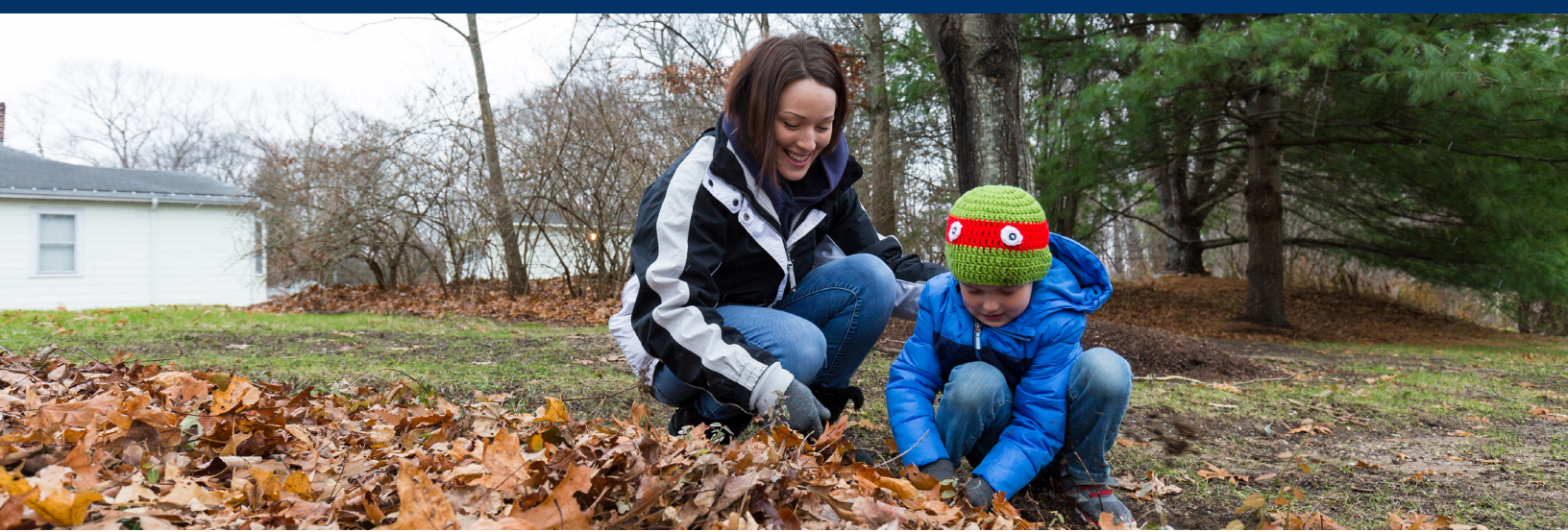


Survey Key Characteristics

**The six key characteristics
of the survey include:**

1. Program type (child care center, family child care)
2. Years in operation
3. Teacher qualifications (degree or credential)
4. Alignment of family's primary language with language used at program
5. Convenience of location
6. Cost (as compared to current cost of care)

¹ The characteristics we included were informed by prior studies using conjoint analysis to examine child care decision-making.



Survey Findings

The analysis of respondents' choice patterns revealed that in selecting a child care program for their children, families showed a **strong** preference for convenience of location, providers with a college degree or credential, and alignment between the family's primary language and the language used by the provider. Respondents showed a **slight** preference for child care centers. We observed these preferences across families of different background characteristics; however, there were some minor differences in families' priorities based on primary language.²



Spanish-speaking families showed a slight preference for family child care providers (compared to child care centers) and valued convenience of location over whether a provider held a degree or credential.



English-speaking families showed a preference for child care centers (compared to family child care providers) and considered provider qualifications (degree or credential) to be more important than convenience of location.

Results of the conjoint analysis indicate that, overall, respondents did not prioritize cost as much as other factors. In addition, when asked about the degree of financial strain child care costs imposed, low-income parents enrolled in the state's **Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)** were four times more likely (34% compared to 8%) to report that costs represented "no strain at all" than parents who did not receive CCAP subsidies.³ This suggests that the CCAP subsidies have been successful in helping to make child care more affordable for working families with low incomes.

² Of the 438 respondents to the survey, 88% reported English as their primary language, while 9% reported that Spanish was their primary language (3% reported other languages).

³ As of November 2025, 71% of CCAP families do not have a co-payment obligation. For those who do, the co-payment, calculated by DHS, represents 1–7% of their income.