Families' and Early Educators' Experiences With the Early Care and Education System in Minnesota

Insights From Surveys and Focus Groups

Keiyitho Omonuwa, Dianne Louise Maglaque, Rowan Hilty, Shreya Mukhopadhyay, Kylee Novak, Abigail Wulah, Jennifer Cleveland, and Kathryn Tout

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Introduction

In March 2022, Child Trends contracted with the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF)[1] to conduct an independent evaluation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for early care and education (ECE) programs. The evaluation was passed by the Minnesota Legislature in 2021[2] and includes several research activities designed to assess how Parent Aware is supporting the state's children, families, and the ECE workforce.

This report details findings from one component of the Parent Aware evaluation focused on understanding the experiences and needs of families and early educators in Minnesota. From November 2023 to March 2024, the research team at Child Trends surveyed more than 300 families and 400 early educators working in licensed ECE programs across the state to learn about their experiences navigating the ECE system in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, how they work together to support children's healthy learning and development, and how state systems—including Parent Aware—can better support their needs. In Spring 2024, our team invited a subset of the families and educators who completed the survey to participate in focus groups in which we collaboratively explored and elaborated on preliminary findings from the surveys.

In this report, we detail our methods and key findings from the surveys and focus groups with families and early educators. Our findings provide valuable insights into how the ECE system in Minnesota is functioning in the wake of the pandemic—both for families and the ECE workforce. We also offer considerations for DCYF leadership that may inform future improvements to Parent Aware and other crucial components of the state's ECE system.

> ## About Parent Aware
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> Parent Aware, Minnesota's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), is a voluntary system that awards participating ECE programs[3] a Rating from One to Four Stars based on their ability to meet quality indicators. Parent Aware offers various tools and resources to:
>
> - Help families find high-quality ECE that prepares children for school and life
> - Foster ongoing quality improvement in ECE programs through grants and supports for ECE educators, including coaching and training

> ## Terminology in This Report
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> Terms like "child care provider" or "early childhood educator" are often used interchangeably to describe the professionals who work in ECE programs, including center-based, family child care, and school-based preschool programs. DCYF received feedback that "early educator" is the preferred term among most professionals across different types of ECE settings. Our team uses this term where possible throughout this report, but we did not edit the language of survey or focus group questions nor did we edit direct quotes from participants.

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[1] The Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) launched on July 1, 2024. From July 2024 to July 2025, state programs and staff will gradually transfer to DCYF from the Departments of Human Services, Education, Health, and Public Safety. As this new agency is established, documents may have previous agency logos or names and the DCYF website may temporarily redirect to original agency web pages. For more details, visit the DCYF website.

[2] The legislation requires that the evaluation include certain research activities to address specific questions about Parent Aware. For more information, see Quality Rating and Improvement System, Minnesota Statutes 124D.142, Subd. 1-4 (2023) at https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/124D.142.

[3] Parent Aware is available for licensed family child care and center-based programs, Head Start programs, public school-based Pre-K programs, and voluntary Pre-K programs. Parent Aware is administered by Minnesota DCYF in coordination with the Department of Health and with support from contractors like the organizations comprising the Child Care Aware system that oversee local implementation.

Background

Pandemic impacts on the ECE sector

During the COVID-19 pandemic, families—and especially families with young children—faced significant stress and uncertainty. Particularly in the first two years of the pandemic, many families experienced job losses or reduced hours, which led to mounting financial insecurity and stress about meeting basic needs.[i] Disruptions to schooling and ECE services also became the norm for many families, as schools and ECE programs were forced to close or operate with reduced hours amid rising health and safety concerns related to the pandemic.[ii] This not only made it difficult for families to find reliable care for their children while balancing their own work and other responsibilities,[iii] but also had significant impacts on children's routines and educational experiences.

Children's early experiences are critical for their cognitive, social, and emotional development, and, for many children, time spent in an ECE program represents a significant portion of their day.[iv] Closures and reduced hours in many ECE programs during the pandemic led to many children having fewer opportunities for learning and socialization with peers.[v] Moreover, ECE programs also faced significant challenges during the pandemic, including navigating new health and safety regulations and managing their business operations amid fluctuating enrollment, staffing challenges, and financial instability.[vi,vii] These stressors impacted not only the strength and well-being of the ECE workforce at large, but also children's experiences in ECE.[viii]

Although the immediate crisis of the pandemic has waned, its enduring impacts on the ECE sector remain. Many families still struggle to access affordable ECE, which in turn limits their ability to participate in the workforce and pursue their educational goals—leading to both short term financial consequences as well as the cumulative effects of lost income and career development over time.[ix,x] Children face ongoing challenges in their learning and social development as many struggle to catch up on socialization and educational time, which were lost during the pandemic.[xi,xii] Early educators also continue to navigate staffing shortages,[xiii] financial hurdles, and many other challenges, all while simultaneously trying to support the heightened needs of children and families to the best of their abilities. All of these challenges facing the ECE sector today are further compounded by the fact that most federal and state pandemic relief funding, which was crucial for programs to sustain their operations during the pandemic, is ending.[xiv]

While the pandemic certainly amplified many challenges facing families and ECE programs, the broader issues facing the ECE sector are not new. Even prior to the pandemic, many families struggled to access affordable ECE options that met their needs—particularly in rural areas and for certain age groups, such as infants and toddlers.[xv] Likewise, the issues related to staffing, wages, and well-being for the ECE workforce today are much the same as the issues programs faced even a decade before the pandemic. In 2019, early educators made an average of $13.09 per hour,[xvi] among the lowest wages of any profession in the country, and in 2024, the average wage has only risen to $15.42 per hour.[xvii] Similarly, the supply of ECE nationwide was falling even in years leading up to the pandemic.[xviii] Still, in the first two months of the pandemic alone, the ECE sector lost an estimated 370,000 jobs nationally and has been slow to recover to pre-pandemic levels, even compared to other highly impacted industries.[xix] This context of the challenges facing the ECE sector, both currently and historically, only further underscores the need for system-level changes to ensure ECE is accessible to families and that early educators are supported and valued for their crucial work. Further, this context highlights the extraordinary resilience demonstrated by families, children, and educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Early educators and other crucial frontline workers in Minnesota and across the country came together to develop creative solutions to ensure that families and children could access needed services. Now, in the wake of the pandemic, leaders in the field have a unique opportunity to reassess ECE systems and develop creative solutions to strengthen the sector so it can weather future crises and continue to support the needs of children and families. In Minnesota, the 2023 Legislature passed and the Governor signed into law, significant investments in ECE supports, many of which continue pandemic relief funding.

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Background on Parent Aware and context for the evaluation

This study was conducted as part of a legislatively-mandated evaluation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's QRIS for ECE programs. Parent Aware rates the quality of ECE programs and provides coaching, training, and other supports to help programs continually improve their quality so that families across the state can find high-quality care that meets their needs and supports children's healthy learning and development.

Importantly, this evaluation coincides with two other DCYF initiatives to strengthen the ECE system in Minnesota: 1) the Parent Aware Redesign,[4] which seeks to understand and address inequities within Parent Aware via upcoming revisions to the system, and 2) the Child Care Regulation Modernization Projects, which aim to improve tools and standards related to ECE licensing. As DCYF and other state leaders continue to explore ways to improve Parent Aware in the future through the Parent Aware evaluation and other ongoing projects, it is essential that any changes are informed by the lived experiences of families and early educators who navigate the state's ECE system.

To aid the state in efforts to develop meaningful and community-informed changes to Parent Aware, our team at Child Trends engaged families and early educators in Minnesota via surveys and focus groups. The goal of these efforts was to learn about families' and educators' experiences navigating the ECE system in the wake of the pandemic, how educators and families work together to support children's healthy learning and development, and how state systems such as Parent Aware can better support their needs. This report outlines our methods for the work, key findings, and considerations for DCYF as they explore future improvements to Parent Aware. Additional information about the Parent Aware evaluation, including reports of findings from other research activities, can be found on the project webpage.[5]

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[4] Read more about the Parent Aware Redesign here: https://mn.gov/dhs/partners-and-providers/program-overviews/child-care-and-early-education/parent-aware/

[5] For example, as part of the evaluation, our team developed a brief with reflections on the methods and measured used to understand quality and children's development in Rated programs, which can be found here: Methods and Measures for Understanding Children's Experiences in Parent Aware Rated Programs

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Methodology and Sample

To understand the ECE system in Minnesota, we engaged both families and early educators at multiple timepoints and in both online surveys and focus groups to learn about their experiences, reflections, and needs. In this section, we describe our methodology for the study, including our guiding research questions, data collection procedures, and approach to analyzing feedback shared by families and educators.
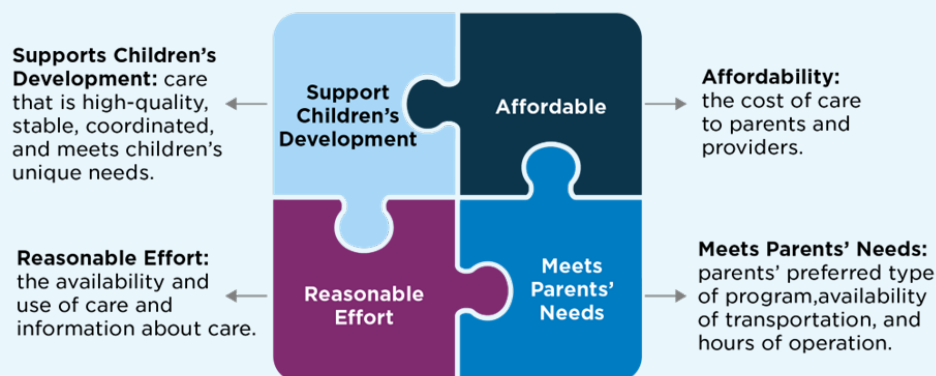
Research questions

Minnesota families

We engaged families from across Minnesota who had a child aged five or younger enrolled in some type of ECE arrangement. Our goal in engaging families via a survey and focus groups was to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent are Minnesota families able to equitably access ECE programs that meet their needs? (See Textbox 1 for a definition of equitable access to ECE.)
- How do families think about quality in ECE settings?
- How do families perceive their young children's learning and development?
    - In what areas are children on track, and in what areas do they need support?
- What role do early educators play in supporting families' needs, including needs outside of ECE?
- To what extent did the COVID-19 pandemic impact families' experiences with the ECE system, including their views on what makes a quality program, their ability to access care that meets their needs, their children's learning and development, and their relationship with their ECE program/educator?

Textbox 1. Framework for Defining Equitable Access to ECE

To understand the extent to which families in Minnesota can equitably access ECE, our team drew on the Access Framework. This framework is a reminder of the multiple factors that families must consider in their decisions about ECE. Equitable access means that barriers related systematically to families' characteristics (e.g., language, work schedules, neighborhood) are addressed/removed.

Supports Children's Development: care that is high-quality, stable, coordinated, and meets children's unique needs.

Affordability: the cost of care to parents and providers.

Reasonable Effort: the availability and use of care and information about care.

Meets Parents' Needs: parents' preferred type of program, availability of transportation, and hours of operation.

Early educators

Our team engaged early educators who worked in ECE programs across Minnesota in a survey and focus groups to answer the following research questions:

- To what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic affected programs' business operations, early educators' well-being, and ability to provide quality ECE to children and families?
  - Have any challenges that emerged during the pandemic persisted?
  - What new challenges have emerged, and what supports do programs need to overcome them?
- What were early educators' experiences supporting families and caring for children during and in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?
  - What changes did educators see in the needs of children and families, and have those changes persisted?
  - To what extent do early educators feel comfortable supporting families' varying needs, and how could Parent Aware and other state systems better support them?
- How do early educators think about quality in ECE settings?
- How could Parent Aware support a stronger and more equitable ECE system in Minnesota? (See Textbox 1.)
  - How do educators perceive Parent Aware and the Rating process?
  - What additional resources or supports do programs need to support their operations, early educators' well-being, and staff retention?
  - What additional resources or supports do programs need to support the unique needs of the children and families they serve?

Surveys

To address the research questions, our team first conducted a statewide survey of Minnesota families and early educators. Below, we detail the recruitment and sampling approach we used for each study population with the goal of generating findings that represent a diverse array of perspectives.

Recruitment and sampling

Minnesota families

Recruitment and sampling approach. Between November 2023 and April 2024, our team surveyed Minnesota families with a child aged five or younger who regularly attended any type of ECE arrangement.[6] We recruited families from diverse backgrounds with respect to geography, income, and race/ethnicity (see Textbox 2 for definitions and Table 1 for a summary of our sampling targets compared to response rates). The team worked with PureSpectrum, a marketing firm,[7] to recruit families to complete our survey. PureSpectrum's online system identified individuals who were eligible based on the sampling criteria we provided and invited them to complete the survey. Because our team encountered challenges recruiting

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[6] In the family survey, we defined "any type of ECE arrangement" as any care provided by someone other than a parent or legal guardian, including child care centers, family child care homes, school-based programs, Head Start, and family, friend, and neighbor care. We defined "regularly attending" as receiving care at least once per week.

[7] PureSpectrum is an online survey marketplace that offers a market research and insights platform. PureSpectrum partners with several research panel providers who supply survey respondents to PureSpectrum's platform, which then connects those respondents to surveys and other opportunities matched to their individual characteristics and interests.

families from micropolitan and rural areas of the state through PureSpectrum's platform, we employed an additional targeted recruitment strategy to ensure the survey captured the experiences and perspectives of families in those regions of the state. Starting in February 2024, we reached out to ECE programs in micropolitan and rural areas and asked them to share information about our study and a link to the survey with families of children aged five and younger enrolled in their programs. Surveyed families received a $20 gift card for their time and participation and were also entered into a raffle for a $250 gift card.

Final survey sample. Out of our goal of 450 completed surveys, we received a total of 319 responses from families (71% of target responses). Table 1 outlines our target and actual responses—both overall and by family characteristics (e.g., income).

Table 1. Family survey sampling targets compared to response rates

Demographics	Sampling Targets	Completed Surveys
Overall	450	319
Geography		
Metropolitan	175	168
Micropolitan	175	93
Rural	100	57
Income*		
175% FPL and above	225	178
Below 175% FPL	225	108
Race and Ethnicity		
Hispanic	84	15
American Indian	20	10
Asian	60	16
Black	100	35
White	186	233

Source: Child Trends data (2024)
Note: Some families chose not to provide certain demographic information (e.g., income) and therefore are missing from the above table. Respondents could select multiple options for their racial identity.

Early educators

Data source. DCYF provided Child Trends with publicly available licensing data on all ECE programs across the state, including center-based and family child care programs as well as Head Start, School Readiness, and Voluntary Pre-K programs. The administrative data included contact information and other details about the program, including program type, location, ages served, and Parent Aware Ratings. This list of programs was then filtered to exclude programs that did not serve preschoolers and programs that had a license status of "closed" or "expired."

Recruitment and sampling approach. To ensure the evaluation captured the needs and experiences of a diverse group of early educators across the state, our team used a stratified sampling approach to conduct recruitment for the early educator survey, using program type and Parent Aware participation as our strata. (See Table 2 for more information about our sampling targets.) We conducted outreach via email in batches, meaning that every one to two weeks, we contacted a new subset of educators to invite them to complete the survey. Each batch contained a mix of child care centers and family child care programs, including both unrated programs and Rated programs at various Star levels. As educators completed surveys, we monitored our response rates and progress towards sampling targets to inform targeted recruitment in subsequent batches. To recruit Head Start and school-based Pre-K programs to complete the survey, our team contacted a subset of Head Start grantee directors (overseeing Head Start programs) and school district leads (overseeing school-based Pre-K programs) to ask for their help forwarding the survey to staff from a subset of sites they oversee. Educators who completed the survey received a $20 gift card as a thank you for their time and were also entered into a raffle for an additional $250 gift card.

For child care centers, we asked that someone in a leadership position at the program (e.g., a Center Director, Assistant Director, or Curriculum Coordinator) complete the survey, as those individuals are often well-positioned to answer questions about both day-to-day operations and about the program overall. In Head Start and school-based Pre-K programs, we asked the school district leads and grantee directors to recommend who from each site would best be able to answer the questions in the survey.

Final survey sample. From the 2,354 programs we contacted, a total of 433 educators responded to the survey (18% response rate). Table 2 shows our response rates for the survey, both overall and by program type. Additional details about the sample of educators who responded to the survey (e.g., geographic location, Parent Aware participation status and Rating) are included later in this report.

Table 2. Early educator survey targets and response rates, by program type

Survey targets and response rates	All programs	Child care centers	Family child care	Head Start[a]	School-based Pre-K[a]
Educators invited to complete survey	2,354	746	1,602	-	-
Target number of survey responses	400	150	200	25	25
Surveys completed	433	142	241	27	23
Response rate	18%	19%	15%	-	-

Source: Child Trends data (2024)
Note: [a] For Head Start and School-based Pre-K programs, we worked with the agencies (i.e., Head Start grantees and school districts) that oversee individual ECE sites and asked them to forward the survey to a subset of the sites and staff they oversee. As such, we are not able to confirm the number of sites that received an invitation to complete the survey.

Focus groups

To further contextualize and expand on the results of the surveys, our team conducted focus groups with a subset of individuals who completed a survey. Below, we detail our approach to recruitment and sampling for focus groups with each study population to obtain detailed information from a range of opinions and perspectives.

Recruitment and sampling

The team developed both the family and early educator focus group protocols based on preliminary findings from the corresponding surveys fielded in late 2023 to early 2024. We collaborated with Minnesota DCYF to refine topics for each focus group protocol. For the family protocol, we explored topics on ECE access and

challenges, children's learning and development, educators' role in supporting families' needs, and Parent Aware feedback. For the early educator protocol, key topics were the needs of families, educators' stressors, and children's learning and development.

The team recruited families and educators who had completed the initial survey and indicated interest in participating in a follow-up focus group. We recruited potential participants over email and provided information on the focus group with a link to an online screener survey. Eligible participants were then invited to sign up for a 60-minute virtual focus group slot through Microsoft Bookings. Registered participants received reminder emails until the day of the focus group. After the conclusion of the focus group, we sent all participants a $50 gift card as a thank you for their time.

Final focus group samples

Final family focus group sample

Out of the 179 individuals who indicated interest in a focus group on the survey, 53 individuals completed our focus group screener survey (30% response rate). From those who completed the screener, the team conducted seven focus groups across a total of 31 participants (58% attendance rate).

Final early educator focus group sample

Out of the 245 individuals who indicated interest in a focus group on the survey, 64 individuals completed our focus group screener survey (26% response rate). From those who completed the screener, the team conducted seven focus groups with a total of 44 educators (69% attendance rate).

Analysis

Family and early educator surveys

Descriptive analyses were conducted of both family and early educator surveys. We removed duplicate responses and responses with data quality concerns, such as those with nonsensical or irrelevant answers to open-ended questions, those completed in significantly less time than the average respondent, and those where we noticed straight-lining in matrix questions.[8] In total, we removed 27 responses from the family survey dataset due to data quality concerns. No responses were removed from the early educator survey.

Family and early educator focus groups

To analyze themes from the focus groups, we developed two codebooks aligned with the questions in each focus group protocol (for families and educators), which included interpretive codes that arose from discussions in the focus groups. An independent team member, not involved in the initial drafting of the codebook, reviewed and did a quality check on both codebooks. Then, in Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software, team members coded transcripts from both sets of focus groups. After coding, team members conducted a thematic analysis and synthesized the coded excerpts, pulling out common themes and key quotes. The team members reviewed each other's syntheses to ensure they accurately and comprehensively captured key information from the focus group discussions.

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[8] We removed responses that were completed too quickly (relative to how long the average respondent took to complete the survey), as this indicates that the respondent may not have been responding accurately. Straight-lining in matrix questions refers to a pattern in which respondents select the same option for a series of questions organized in a matrix grid (i.e., creating a straight line down the grid), and those responses were likewise removed because this indicates that the respondent may not have been answering accurately.

Findings

Sample characteristics

Family sample

Table 3 shows more detailed information about the characteristics of families who responded to the survey compared to those who participated in a focus group.

Family survey participants. Around half of families (53%) who responded to the survey were in a metropolitan area. The majority of respondents identified as White (73%), 11 percent identified as Black or African American, and five percent identified as Asian or as Hispanic, Latino, or being of Spanish origin, respectively. Nearly all respondents (91%) said English was their primary language. Around one third of families (34%) reported a household income below 175 percent of the federal poverty level.

Family focus group participants. Over half (n=16) of our focus group families resided in a metropolitan area, with one-fifth (n=6) residing in a rural area. Most (n=27) identified as White, and some (n=4) identified as Black. Most families also identified as non-Hispanic White (n=28). About three-quarters (n=23) of family participants reported they had a household income above 175 percent of the federal poverty level.

Table 3. Family survey and focus group participants' demographic characteristics

Demographics	Family survey (n=319)		Family focus groups (n=31)	
	n	%	n	%
Geography				
Metropolitan	168	53%	16	52%
Micropolitan	93	29%	9	29%
Rural	57	18%	6	19%
Missing	1	<1%	-	-
Race and ethnicity[a]				
White	233	73%	27	87%
Black or African American	35	11%	4	13%
Asian	16	5%	-	-
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	15	5%	1	3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	10	3%	-	-
Another race	2	1%	-	-
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	<1%	-	-
Missing or prefer not to answer	26	8%	-	-
Primary language[a]				
English	289	91%	30	97%
Spanish	5	2%	-	-
Hmong	2	1%	-	-
Prefer not to answer	2	1%	-	-
Another language[b]	8	3%	1	3%
Missing	25	8%	-	-

Demographics	Family survey (n=319)		Family focus groups (n=31)	
	n	%	n	%
Income level				
Families with higher income (175% of the FPL or higher)	178	56%	23	74%
Families with lower income (lower than 175% of the FPL)	108	34%	7	23%
Missing	33	10%	1	3%

Source: Child Trends data (2024)
Notes: [a] Families were able to select multiple options for the questions about race/ethnicity and primary language(s) spoken at home, so those percentages may not add up to 100. [b] Other languages respondents reported included Somali, Amharic, and Vietnamese.

Many families had more than three people in their household and had help with caregiving responsibilities from another adult in the household.

In the survey for families, we asked respondents to think about one of their children aged five or younger who had a regular child care arrangement. Most respondents who completed the survey identified themselves as either the child's mother (72%) or father (24%). Among families who completed the survey, most (79%) had between three and five family members in their household. Survey respondents had varying caregiving responsibilities and degrees of support in their household. Around one in ten respondents (9%) reported being the primary caregiver for someone in their family other than their children, and most respondents (78%) said there was another adult in their household (besides themselves) who usually helped with caregiving responsibilities.

Families had children enrolled in various types of ECE programs, including a mix of Parent Aware Rated and unrated programs.

In the survey, we asked families about the most common ECE arrangement they used for their child. About half families (47%) reported sending their focal child to child care centers or day care centers and some families sent their focal child to family child care homes (21%). Few families with incomes above 175 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (families with higher incomes) reported using Head Start or Early Head Start programs as their primary arrangement (1%), compared to families with incomes below 175 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (families with lower incomes, 10%). See Table 4 for more details on the child care arrangements reported by families who responded to the survey.

A small number of families reported that their focal child was cared for by a friend or family member (16%) or by a nanny (2%). There were some questions in the survey that we only asked of families using a "formal" ECE arrangement, meaning an arrangement provided by an organization (e.g., a center or family child care home) rather than one provided by a family member or friend. Throughout the findings section of this report, we note any questions that were only asked of families using a formal ECE arrangement.

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Table 4. Primary child care arrangements across families (n=319)

Type of child care arrangement	Families with lower incomes (n=108)	Families with higher incomes (n=178)	Overall (n=319)
Child care center/day care center	41%	52%	47%
Family child care home	19%	22%	21%
Friend or family member	21%	13%	16%
Preschool, nursery school, or public school-based program	7%	10%	9%
Head Start/Early Head Start program	10%	1%	4%
Nanny	2%	2%	2%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

We also asked families whether their current ECE program was Parent Aware Star Rated. More than half of families using Head Start/ Early Head Start programs and child care centers said their programs were Rated (57% and 55%). Between 21 and 52 percent of families were not sure whether their program was Rated (see Table 5).

Table 5. Parent Aware Star Ratings, as reported by families (n=260)

Type of child care arrangement	Parent Aware Rated	Not Parent Aware Rated	Unsure
Head Start/Early Head Start program (n=14)	57%	21%	21%
Child care center/day care center (n=149)	55%	6%	39%
Preschool, nursery school, or public school-based program (n=29)	45%	3%	52%
Family child care home (n=68)	38%	16%	46%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

We also asked families about how many hours their child is enrolled in care during a typical week. Families most often reported their child was in full-time care (34%), and one in four families with lower incomes enrolled their children in care for 10 hours or less per week (see Table 6).

Table 6. Duration for which child was in care each week, on average (n=319)

ECE hours per week	Families with lower incomes (n=108)	Families with higher incomes (n=178)	Overall (n=319)
10 hours or less	25%	13%	16%
11 to 20 hours	15%	14%	15%
21 to 30 hours	17%	16%	17%
31 to 40 hours	30%	38%	34%
41 hours or more	11%	17%	16%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

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When families' ECE programs cannot accommodate the times that families need care, many families adjust their schedules at home or rely on a family member or friend for child care.

The hours and times of year at which families need ECE for their children varied, and there was also variation in whether their primary ECE arrangement could meet those needs. Families most commonly reported needing full-time (36%) and year-round care (45%). For each of the times families reported needing care, we also asked them whether their current ECE program offered care at those times (see Table 7). More than 70 percent of families who needed early morning, full-time, part-time, and year-round care said that their current ECE program could meet those scheduling needs. In contrast, fewer than one in ten families who needed weekend or overnight care reported that their child care arrangement offered this scheduling.

Table 7. Families whose current ECE program can meet their scheduling needs (n=205)

Need	Families who need care	Percent of families whose care needs were fulfilled
Early morning care	84	77%
Full-time care	114	76%
Part-time or part-day care (<30 hours/week)	66	74%
Year-round	143	71%
Flexible scheduling (variable hours and schedules)	73	49%
Year-round except for summer	50	36%
Weekend care	38	8%
Overnight care	31	6%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

If families were unable to have their scheduling needs met by their regular ECE program, we asked how families typically addressed this gap. Overall, families reported they relied on a family member or friend (67%) or adjusted their schedules at home (55%); notably, about four in ten families with lower incomes reported adjusting their schedules to cover their child care needs, while about six in ten families with higher incomes reported adjusting their schedules (see Table 8).

Table 8. Alternative child care arrangements when child care needs were left unmet/unfulfilled (n=317)

Arrangement	Families with lower incomes (n=107)	Families with higher incomes (n=177)	Overall (n=317)
Family member or friend	65%	68%	67%
I or someone else at home adjusts our schedules	44%	63%	55%
Another child care program	4%	5%	5%
Something else (e.g., hire a babysitter, take children to work)	1%	1%	1%
Not applicable – my program offers care at all the times I need	16%	9%	11%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Early educator sample

Early educator survey participants. The majority of educators who responded to the survey identified as female (96%), White (93%), and reported English as their primary language (97%). Table 9 shows more detailed information about the characteristics of educators who responded to the survey.

Table 9. Early educator survey respondent demographics (n=433)

Demographics	n	%
Gender		
Female	417	96%
Male	8	2%
Non-binary, gender fluid, or gender expansive	1	<1%
Prefer not to answer	5	1%
Race and ethnicity		
White	403	93%
Black or African American	9	2%
Asian	7	2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	<1%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1	<1%
Prefer not to answer	10	2%
Primary language		
English	419	97%
Spanish	2	<1%
Somali	2	<1%
Hmong	2	<1%
Another language	4	1%
Prefer not to answer	3	1%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Among the 192 early educators from child care centers, Head Start, or school-based Pre-K programs who responded to the survey, most were the director at their program (64%). Others were assistant directors, curriculum coordinators, or had some other kind of leadership or decision-making role at their program.

Table 10. Respondents' roles at child care centers, Head Start, and school-based Pre-K programs (n=192)

Role	n	%
Director	122	64%
Assistant director	3	2%
Curriculum coordinator	10	5%
Another leadership/decision-making role (e.g., lead teacher, ECE coordinator, Chief Operating Officer, president, principal, chief academic officer)	57	30%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Nearly seven in ten center educators (69%) had been in their current role for six or more years, and six in ten family child care educators (64%) had been at their current program for six or more years. Around one in four educators reported being in their current role or program for 20 or more years (26%).

Early educator focus group participants. In the final sample, 50 percent of educators worked in licensed child care centers, 43 percent worked in family child care, and seven percent worked in a public-school Pre-K. Fifty percent of educators were at ECE programs not rated by Parent Aware; thirty-two percent of

educators were at programs rated at Four-Stars, 11 percent at Two-Stars, and seven percent at Three-Stars. The team mainly spoke to educators located in metropolitan (45%) and micropolitan (48%) locations throughout Minnesota. Ninety-five percent of the educators identified as White, two percent identified as Black or African American, and two percent identified as having Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origins.

Across program types, around forty percent of programs were Parent Aware Rated and accepted children receiving Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) subsidies.

As described in the Survey Recruitment & Sampling section, our sample for the early educator survey included educators from 241 family child care programs, 142 child care centers, 27 Head Start sites (representing five Head Start grantees), and 23 school-based Pre-K sites (representing 22 school districts).[9] Below, we describe various other characteristics of those programs to contextualize our findings. Throughout this report, we sometimes present findings for family child care educators compared to center educators, the latter of which is inclusive of educators working in child care centers, Head Start, and school-based Pre-K programs.

Of the center educators who responded to the survey, 55 percent worked in a Rated program, mostly Four-Star programs (92% of those Rated). Of the family child care educators, 42 percent were from Rated programs, with a more even distribution of Star Ratings. More center-based programs (45%) were located in the metropolitan area compared to family child care programs (23%). One-third of family child care programs were located in rural areas compared to around one in ten center-based programs (see Table 11). Just over half of all programs were willing to accept children receiving subsidies through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).[10]

Table 11. Early educator survey respondents' program characteristics (n=433)

	Center-based programs (n=192)		Family child care programs (n=241)	
	n	%	n	%
Parent Aware Ratings				
Unrated	86	45%	139	58%
Parent Aware Rated	106	55%	102	42%
One-Star	*3*	*2%*	*13*	*5%*
Two-Star	*2*	*1%*	*31*	*13%*
Three-Star	*3*	*2%*	*23*	*10%*
Four-Star	*98*	*51%*	*35*	*15%*
Geography				
Metropolitan	86	45%	56	23%

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[9] In Minnesota, sites offering Head Start or school-based Pre-K programming are overseen by Head Start grantee agencies and school districts, respectively. The 27 Head Start sites that responded to the survey represented five Head Start Grantee agencies, and the 23 school-based Pre-K sites that responded represented 22 school districts.

[10] Information about programs' willingness to accept children receiving CCAP subsidies was included in the administrative data provided by DCYF, though we did not have this information for the Head Start or state Pre-K programs that participated in the study. Programs were counted as willing to accept children receiving CCAP if they met one of the following three criteria: 1) had a CCAP ID number, 2) were CCAP Registered showing a status of "Yes" (as reported in the Provider Business Update), or 3) reported currently caring for or being willing to care for children receiving subsidy (as reported in the Provider Business Update). Willingness to serve CCAP does not mean a program was serving children receiving CCAP at the time of the study.

	Center-based programs (n=192)		Family child care programs (n=241)	
	n	%	n	%
Micropolitan	35	18%	101	42%
Rural	15	8%	80	33%
Willing to accept children receiving CCAP subsidy				
Yes	95	49%	147	61%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

We asked early educators to provide an estimated breakdown of the racial and ethnic composition of their staff (center educators only) and the children served in their programs. Across all respondents in center-based programs, most said that the majority of their staff (more than three in four) were non-Hispanic White. The average center-based program served children from diverse backgrounds, and on average estimated that around two thirds of children in care were non-Hispanic White, while around 15 percent were Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino, respectively. The average family child care educator reported serving children who were primarily non-Hispanic White (around 90%).[11]

Families' and educators' experiences with the ECE system

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

In the survey, we asked families some questions about their most recent experiences with ECE for a "focal child" aged five or younger who had been enrolled in child care for at least one day per week in the last six months.[12] Knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on the ECE sector, we also asked families whether they had any children in child care during the peak of the pandemic, which we defined as any time from March 2020 and December 2022.[13] Of the 319 families who responded to the survey, 197 reported that their focal child was enrolled in an ECE program during the peak of the pandemic (62%), and 16 respondents reported that they had another child in ECE during that timeframe (5%). These respondents were asked a few additional questions about their experiences related to ECE during the peak of the pandemic and how their more recent ECE experiences (i.e., since January 2023) compared to that timeframe.

Both families and educators report that some elements of ECE have improved since the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, though staffing remains a challenge.

We asked family and educator survey respondents about their experiences receiving and providing child care during the COVID-19 pandemic—both in the last year (since January 2023), and in 2022 or before.
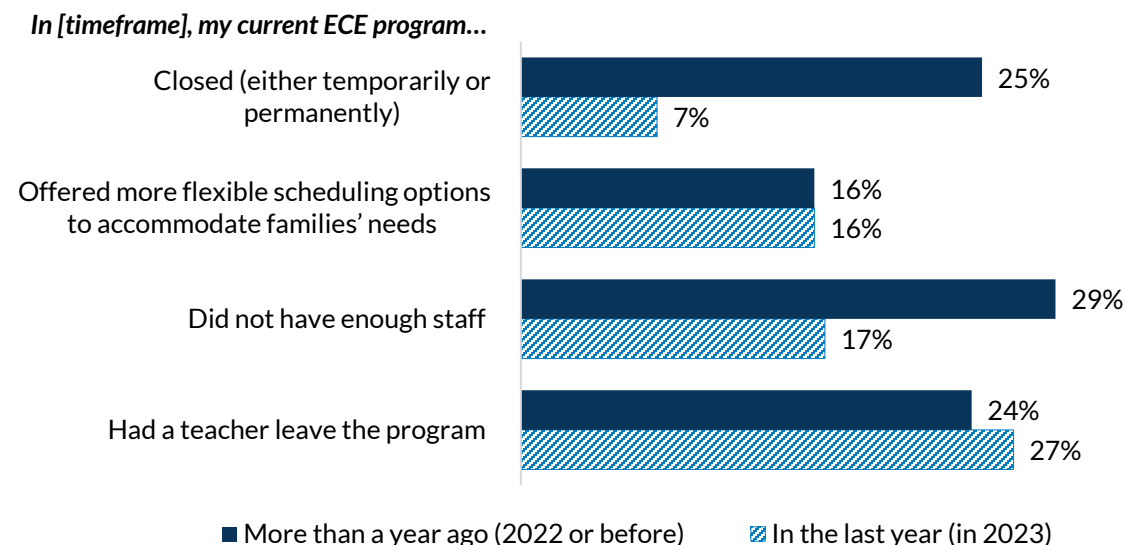
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[11] We asked early educators to estimate the racial/ethnic demographics of the staff and children served at their programs to help contextualize the sample of programs participating in the study. However, because the data represent the perceptions of the educator who completed the survey, rather than staff or family reports, we do not include exact numbers in this report.

[12] If a family had more than one child aged five or younger who regularly attended ECE, we asked families to think about their oldest child under age five.

[13] The World Health Organization declared an end to the COVID-19 global public health emergency on May 5, 2023; however, many states had already relaxed COVID-19 restrictions prior to that time. (See: https://www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/covid-19-public-health-emergency/index.html.)

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Families reported that some experiences with ECE programs had improved in the last year (see Figure 1). For example, although around one in four families (29%) reported their programs not having enough staff in 2022 or before, only 16 percent reported this issue in 2023. Likewise, 25 percent of families reported their ECE programs closing in 2022 or before, compared to only seven percent of families in 2023. Families also reported that some elements of their experiences with ECE programs had not improved in 2023. In particular, families reported having a teacher leave the program and being offered more flexible scheduling options from their program in 2023 at similar rates as in 2022 or before.

Figure 1. Changes to families' ECE programs over time (n=176)

In [timeframe], my current ECE program…

	More than a year ago (2022 or before)	In the last year (in 2023)
Closed (either temporarily or permanently)	25%	7%
Offered more flexible scheduling options to accommodate families' needs	16%	16%
Did not have enough staff	29%	17%
Had a teacher leave the program	24%	27%

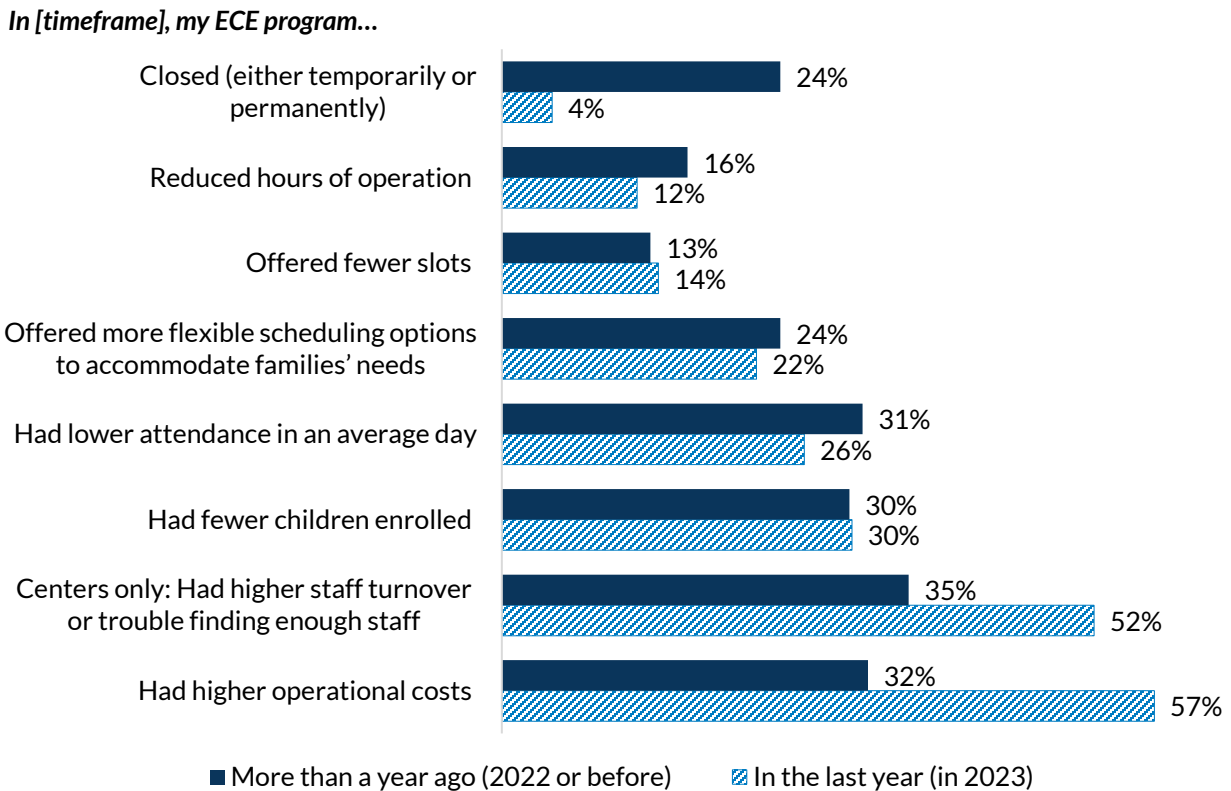■ More than a year ago (2022 or before)   ▨ In the last year (in 2023)

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Like families, educators reported that some factors that impacted their program during the COVID-19 pandemic had improved in the last year (see Figure 2). Namely, one in four educators (24%) reported that their programs closed in 2022 or before, compared to only four percent in 2023. However, educators also reported that some factors impacting their program had not improved or had even become worse in the last year. More than half of early educators (57%), for example, reported high operational costs in 2023, compared to only one in three educators in 2022 or before. Similarly, more than half of center educators (52%) also reported more turnover or difficulty finding enough staff in 2023 compared to 35 percent in 2022 or before.

Overall, center and family child care educators reported they experienced these factors impacting their programs at similar rates, both in 2023 and in 2022 or before, with a few exceptions. As noted, educators' reports of staff turnover or difficulties finding staff were overwhelmingly reported by those in center-based programs. Additionally, a higher proportion of center educators reported lower enrollment and attendance, as well as offering fewer slots in 2022 or before. (See Appendix A, Table A for additional data from the early educator survey on changes to programs' operations over time).

Figure 2. Changes to programs' operations over time (n=433)

In [timeframe], my ECE program…

Category	More than a year ago (2022 or before)	In the last year (in 2023)
Closed (either temporarily or permanently)	24%	4%
Reduced hours of operation	16%	12%
Offered fewer slots	13%	14%
Offered more flexible scheduling options to accommodate families' needs	24%	22%
Had lower attendance in an average day	31%	26%
Had fewer children enrolled	30%	30%
Centers only: Had higher staff turnover or trouble finding enough staff	35%	52%
Had higher operational costs	32%	57%

■ More than a year ago (2022 or before)   ▨ In the last year (in 2023)

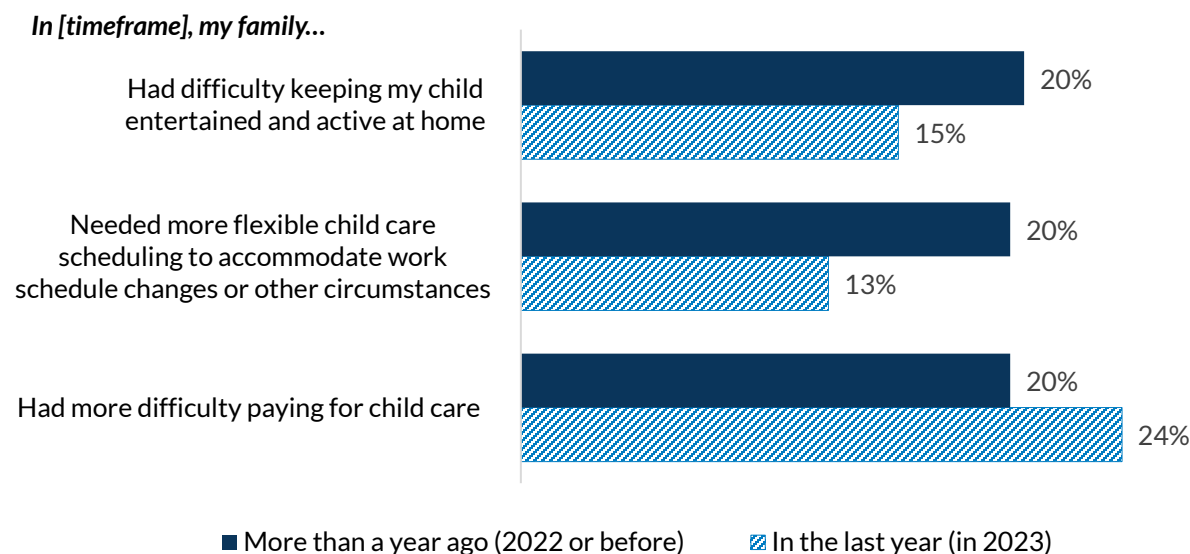**Source:** Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Early educators also experienced fluctuating changes to their enrollment and attendance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many educators noted that they needed to close their programs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some have also noticed that, since the onset of the pandemic there has been an increased trend of programs across Minnesota closing permanently. Across the focus groups, there was a wide range of experiences with enrollment changes (e.g., some early educators saw decreased enrollment but never closed their program, other educators never experienced any enrollment changes).

For changes to attendance, one educator saw daily attendance rates between 85 and 90 percent, while another noticed that they also have lower attendance on a lot of days—mainly due to children getting sick. Educators reported increased sickness both among children and staff in their program.

Families continue to face difficulties paying for child care.

We also asked families about changes in their ECE-related needs and experiences in the last year (since January 2023) compared to during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (in 2022 or before; see Figure 3). Slightly fewer families reported needing more flexible child care scheduling options or having difficulty keeping their child entertained at home in the last year compared to in 2022 and before. However, slightly more families reported that they had more difficulty paying for child care in the last year (24%) compared to in 2022 or before (20%).

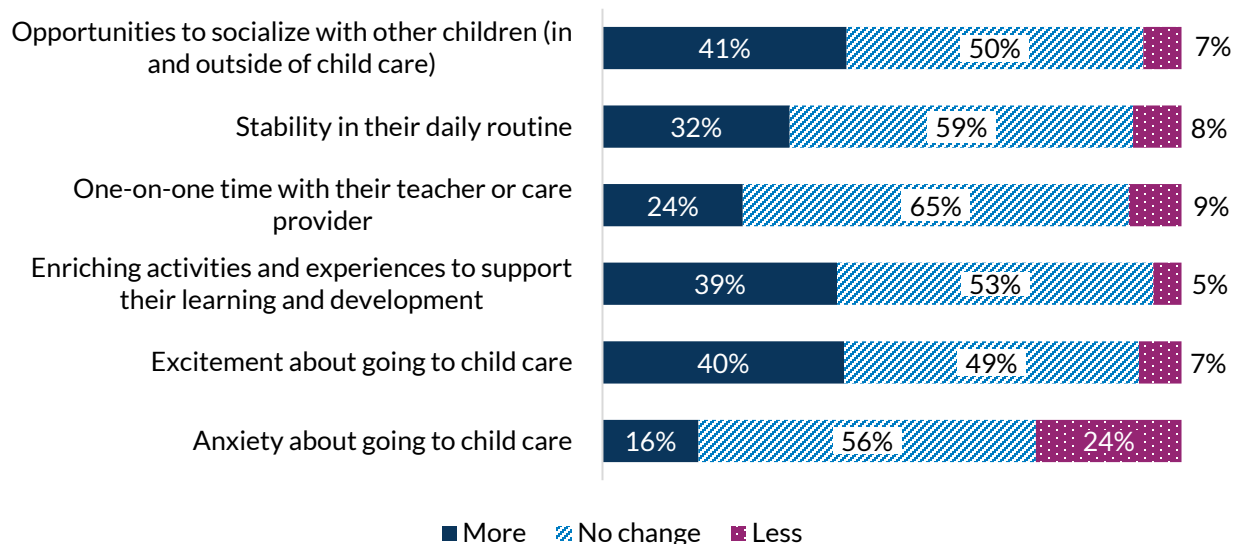**Figure 3.** Changes to families' needs and experiences with ECE over time (n=176)

In [timeframe], my family...

Had difficulty keeping my child entertained and active at home
- More than a year ago: 20%
- In the last year: 15%

Needed more flexible child care scheduling to accommodate work schedule changes or other circumstances
- More than a year ago: 20%
- In the last year: 13%

Had more difficulty paying for child care
- More than a year ago: 20%
- In the last year: 24%

■ More than a year ago (2022 or before)   ▨ In the last year (in 2023)

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

In the last year, more families are seeing their children experience positive changes in their ECE-related experiences, including more socialization and excitement about going to care.

Further, we asked families about changes in their ECE-related experiences such as socialization, excitement about attending care, enriching activities and experiences, stable routine, one-on-one time with their teacher or provider (i.e., early educator), and anxiety about attending care (see Figure 4). Around half of families or more reported no change in their children's experiences with ECE since January 2023 (53%), but many reported positive changes in the last year. For example, 41 percent of families reported that their child had more opportunities to socialize with other children in the last year. Similarly, more families reported increases than decreases in the last year for multiple positive types of ECE-related experiences, including having enriching activities to support children's learning, excitement about child care, stability in daily routines, and one-on-one time with providers; less than ten percent of families reported decreases for each of these experiences. Additionally, more families reported their child having less anxiety about going to child care (24%) than having increased anxiety (16%).

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Figure 4. Changes in children's experiences in child care since January 2023, as reported by families (n=169)

In the last year, my child had [more/no change/less]…

Experience	More	No change	Less
Opportunities to socialize with other children (in and outside of child care)	41%	50%	7%
Stability in their daily routine	32%	59%	8%
One-on-one time with their teacher or care provider	24%	65%	9%
Enriching activities and experiences to support their learning and development	39%	53%	5%
Excitement about going to child care	40%	49%	7%
Anxiety about going to child care	16%	56%	24%

■ More ▨ No change ■ Less

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note. Respondents who responded to at least one of the change options were included in the analyses. All percents don't add up to 100% due to missing data.

Few families report major difficulties adjusting to changes related to their children's ECE.

Among families who reported that the COVID-19 pandemic caused changes to their ECE arrangement or changes to their child's ECE experiences, 76 percent of families found it "very easy" or "somewhat easy" to adjust to the changes, and 23 percent found it "somewhat difficult" or "very difficult" to adjust to the changes (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Families' ease of adjusting to any changes in child care (n=146)

Very easy	Somewhat easy	Somewhat difficult	Very difficult
29%	47%	20%	3%
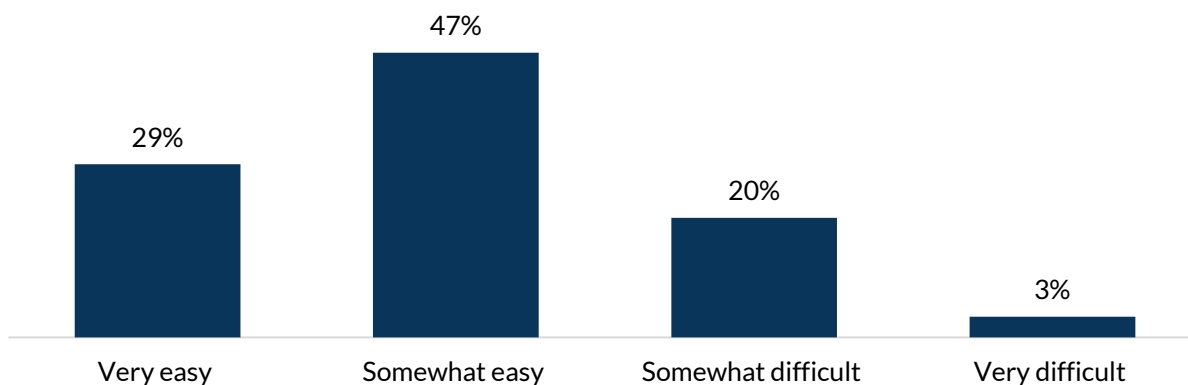
Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Families who reported difficulty adjusting to ECE changes were further asked to describe, in their own words, what was most difficult for their family. Families most commonly mentioned challenges with their personal finances (including the cost of ECE), program closures or other disruptions to ECE schedules or

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staffing, and a lack of consistent routines. A few families also mentioned difficulties with managing their children's social-emotional needs and mental health.

> *"There were quite a few staffing issues in the last year at my child's daycare. My child is very sensitive to changes. Not knowing which classroom she would be in or who her teacher was going to be day to day was very hard on her."* – Family (Survey Respondent)

About half of the families with children in ECE report that ECE is more stable now, while the other half feel ECE is the same or less stable than during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most families said that their ECE situation is much more or a bit more stable now (36%) or about the same since the COVID-19 pandemic (38%; see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Families' perceived stability of ECE now compared to during the COVID-19 pandemic (n=310)
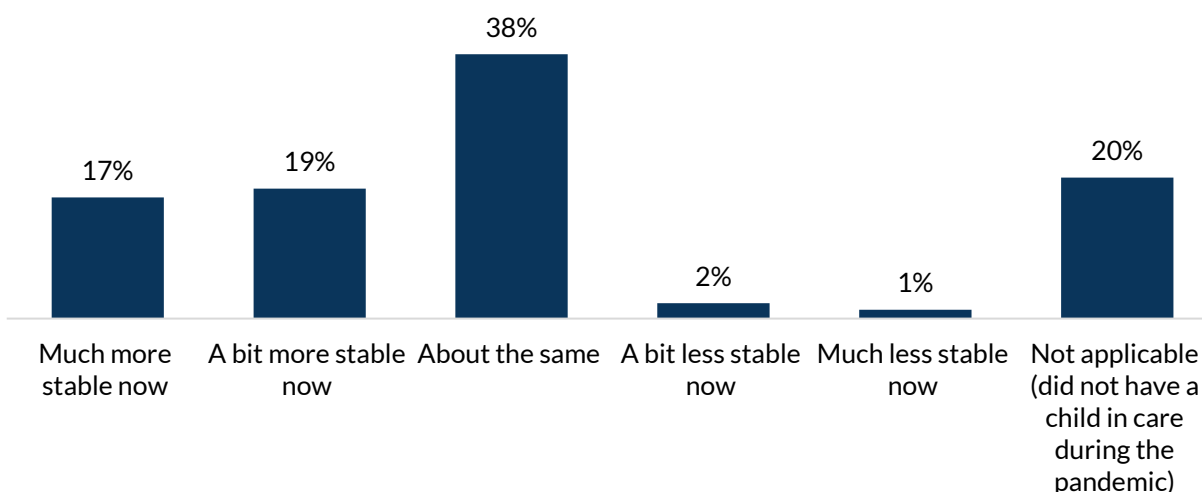
Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note. All percents don't add up to 100% due to missing data.

When probed further, families who said their situation was more stable now commonly mentioned that, since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic has passed and many people are getting "back to normal," many of the ECE-related challenges they experienced during the pandemic have improved. For example, one family shared:

> *"The biggest fears of COVID have subsided and people have returned to their normal ways of life so there aren't as many concerns or restrictions for regular activities."* – Family Survey Respondent

> *"Staffing is more consistent so our children aren't constantly getting used to new caregivers. COVID policies have also gotten more relaxed so we aren't constantly worried about being out of daycare/work for weeks if we get [COVID]."* – Family Survey Respondent

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Families who felt ECE was as stable as or less stable than during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic shared some concerns about the lingering effects of the pandemic, particularly related to programs' policies about sending children home when they are sick:

> *"More illness through facility means my kids can't go to daycare on those days and last minute we need for find alternate childcare options."* – Family Survey Respondent

> *"Child care closes more often if there is a sickness going around."* – Family Survey Respondent

Families and educators reported that they want some of the changes instituted to ECE during the pandemic to continue; families valued stronger health and safety procedures, and educators valued financial assistance and more flexible professional development options.

In the surveys, we asked both families and educators if there were any ECE-related changes during the COVID-19 pandemic that they thought were positive and/or should be continued (see Tables 12-14). Families most commonly felt that changes to their ECE programs made to protect children's health and safety were positive and should be continued, including changes such as increased health and safety procedures (61%), more outdoor activities to reduce children's exposure (36%), and limitations on outside visitors to the program (24%; see Table 12). Some families also mentioned ways that their ECE program created more flexibility to accommodate families' needs, including offering more flexible scheduling options (19%) or remote learning activities for days children cannot attend in person (12%).

Table 12. Pandemic changes that families perceived as positive and want to keep (n=242)

Positive changes during COVID-19	All families
Increased health and safety procedures	61%
Increasing outdoor activities or play time for children to reduce COVID-19 exposure	36%
There have been no new strategies or practices	24%
Limitations on outside visitors to the program	24%
Offering more flexible scheduling options to families	19%
Offering remote or at-home learning activities for days my child can't attend care	12%
Something else (e.g., porch drop offs and pickups)	2%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

Educators mentioned a much wider range of changes that they felt were positive and should be continued. As shown in Table 13, early educators most commonly felt that Child Care Stabilization Grants distributed during the pandemic were positive and should be continued (32%). Educators also mentioned changes to make policies and procedures more flexible, such as the ability to do more trainings and other professional development virtually, flexibility related to licensing and subsidy, and changes to Parent Aware requirements.

Table 13. Pandemic changes that early educators perceived as positive and want to keep (n=433)

Positive changes during COVID-19	All educators
Distribution of Child Care Stabilization Grants	32%
Increased flexibility to do trainings, professional development, and coaching virtually	24%
More flexibility in policies and processes related to child care licensing and subsidy	20%
More awareness of the importance of mental health and well-being	20%
Increasing outdoor activities or play time for children	19%

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Positive changes during COVID-19	All educators
If Rated (at any Star Level): not requiring CLASS® observations for a Three- or Four-Star Rating[14]	18%
More communication from state/local agencies	10%
Offering remote or at-home learning activities for days children can't attend in person	11%
More collaboration with other child care providers (i.e., early educators)	9%
If Rated (at any Star Level): extended Parent Aware Ratings[15]	8%
Changes to health and safety requirements	8%
Something else (e.g., shorter days, more health insurance options, health supplies)	4%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

Flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic was a theme echoed in the early educator focus groups. One center educator shifted their hours during the COVID-19 pandemic and saw the *"happiness of staff increase… significantly."* This educator has since maintained their shifted hours and it continues to be a *"huge benefit to staff to not be here till six."* Another educator appreciated how quickly health and safety policies were put into place during the COVID-19 pandemic and that there was a slower transition to remove restrictions. However, as programs are moving away from the relaxed policies implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., late pick-up fee removal, flexible drop-offs), some educators are experiencing pushback from families. For example, an educator noticed that families' reactions to the health of other children in the program has changed with some families being concerned with other children coming to the program while sick.

Additionally, a couple of early educators explained that both their role and the ECE field at large is more appreciated because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As one educator elaborated,

> *"And the other great thing that came out of COVID is daycares were never really looked at in a positive way in the past, and now we're actually being treated fairly. Or more we're looked at as actually not just a babysitter. You know, we're professionals now."* – Family Child Care Educator Focus Group Participant

Families' recent experiences accessing ECE

A convenient location, positive reviews and recommendations, and flexible scheduling options are top priorities for families when searching for child care arrangements.

In the survey, we asked families to reflect on their most recent experience searching for an ECE program for a child aged five years or younger. As shown in Table 14, families said they considered a wide range of factors in looking for their ideal ECE arrangement. Most commonly, families mentioned factors such as a convenient location (71%), positive reviews or recommendations (61%), and scheduling options that meet their needs (60%). The factors families mentioned varied somewhat based on family income level, most notably among families with lower incomes, who mentioned looking for programs that accept financial assistance (45%) more often than families with higher incomes (12%).

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[14] Parent Aware requires that center-based programs seeking a Three- or Four-Star Rating are observed using the CLASS® tool. Parent Aware also offers those programs optional CLASS® coaching to help them prepare for their Rating. However, due to health and safety concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, both CLASS® observations and optional CLASS® coaching were temporarily paused.
[15] Parent Aware requires that Rated programs at all Star Rating Levels go through a Re-Rating process every two years, during which programs can either apply to renew their current Rating or seek a different Rating. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the timeframe for required Re-Ratings was extended.

These findings are somewhat similar to findings from the 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Household Survey, where the most common reason for searching for care was "meeting parental needs" (68%, which is similar to several options in our surveys, such as convenient location, scheduling needs), followed by "supports for child development" (37%), and "affordability" (3%)[xx]. Another review of existing literature on families' access to ECE found similar patterns, where factors such as health, safety, and quality; location and hours; and cost were found to be the most common factors reported by parents that influenced their decisions in choosing ideal child care arrangements.[xxi]

Table 14. Families preferred features in an ideal ECE arrangement

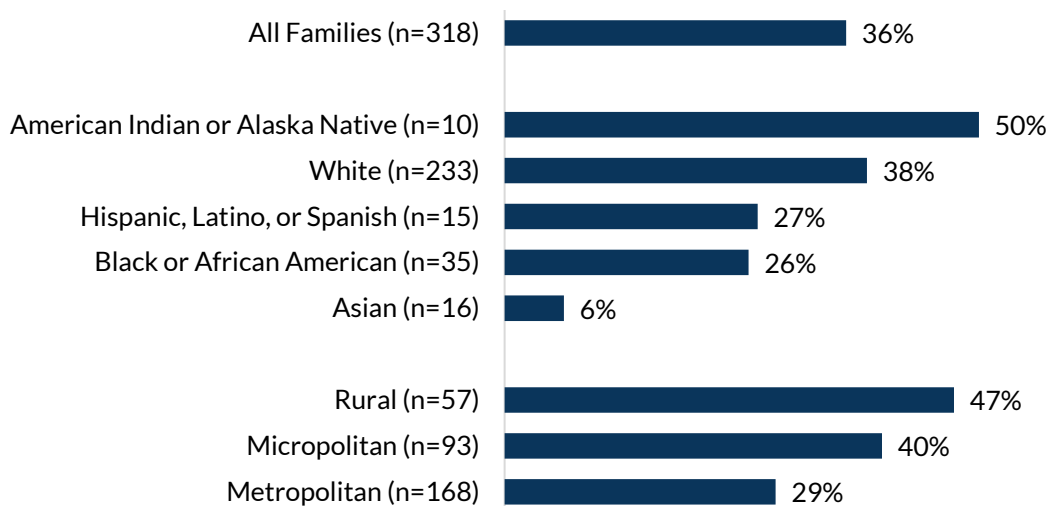| Features of an ideal ECE arrangement	Families with lower incomes (n=107)	Families with higher incomes (n=178)	Overall (n=318)
Conveniently located (e.g., near home, work, or transit)	63%	79%	71%
Positive reviews/recommendations from other families	50%	67%	61%
Scheduling options that meet my family's needs	49%	66%	60%
Accepts financial assistance (e.g., subsidy, scholarships)	45%	12%	25%
Parent Aware Star Rated	31%	24%	26%
Ability to enroll multiple children in the same program	26%	35%	31%
Care provided by a family member or friend	25%	17%	20%
Racial or cultural diversity of program staff	16%	15%	15%
Offers transportation	16%	7%	10%
Racial or cultural diversity of other children & families	15%	14%	15%
Something else (e.g., affordability, offers healthy meals, caring staff)	5%	4%	4%
Multilingual staff or programming (specifically in Spanish, Hmong, Ojibwe, and ASL)	4%	4%	4%
Other disability accommodations (e.g., working with children with autism, speech therapy)	2%	2%	2%
Wheelchair accessibility	1%	4%	3%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

Families in rural areas reported more difficulties finding an ECE program that both meets their needs and has openings.

We asked families to reflect more broadly on their most recent experiences searching for care. Overall, around two thirds of families who responded to the survey said it was very or somewhat easy to find a program that met their needs and had an opening. Among those who said the experience was very or somewhat difficult, however, we did find some variation based on family characteristics (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Percent of families reporting it was somewhat or very difficult to find a program that met their needs and had openings, by race/ethnicity and geography (n=318)

All Families (n=318)	36%
American Indian or Alaska Native (n=10)	50%
White (n=233)	38%
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (n=15)	27%
Black or African American (n=35)	26%
Asian (n=16)	6%
Rural (n=57)	47%
Micropolitan (n=93)	40%
Metropolitan (n=168)	29%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

We also asked families who reported it was somewhat or very difficult to find a program that met their needs and had openings to describe in their own words what was most difficult about their experience. Nearly all families (89%) mentioned challenges finding a program that met a specific need or preference, including, most commonly, programs that accept infants, accept multiple children from different age groups, can care for children with special needs, or offer hours of care aligned with their family's needs. Some families noted that generally there are not many programs in the area where they live, and those that are in the area are often full and have long waiting lists. Around one in four families mentioned that cost was also a significant barrier to finding a program.

> *"Infant care. She needed to be 1 before going. The United States doesn't support parents to stay home like other countries do. They value that first year care. Ours values money. It was difficult but we made adjustments and I stayed home her first year."* – Family Survey Respondent

> *"A lot of care locations were booked in our area. We ended up splitting our children into two different care locations for a while, then finally got both into the same program."* – Family Survey Respondent

While families cited several considerations when selecting child care for their children, many explained that these were trivial due to limited availability, especially in rural areas.

During the focus groups, many families described cost, location and scheduling/hours of operation as the key criteria they use when looking for child care. Others indicated child care program-specific considerations as important to their search such as curriculum, safety, and staff to children ratio. However, many families shared that availability eventually became the key factor as there were not several options to select from. One participant elaborated on the limited availability in rural areas and how this meant families did not have the opportunity to choose an ECE program, but that she was lucky to secure child care even if she could not choose:

> *"So I live in a rural area and to be honest we didn't have many options. I had to be on several wait lists. I was pretty lucky to get in the main area daycare and again…I didn't have options to look and check out different locations…But as I said, sometimes we don't have the option of…checking several places before deciding on one. The places were very limited in the area."* – Family Focus Group Participant

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Families often had to prioritize specific considerations over others as many families could not find a program that met all their needs. One participant reflected on the reality that her main considerations may not be met by the child care program she eventually selects:

> *"I think there are things that I look for and then there are also [those where] it's more of a wish list and the reality is you don't often get the things that you like to see in a daycare. My ideals would be…a smaller center, not a chain, low turnover among staff, affordability."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Another participant described the rollercoaster process of finding child care that meets their family's needs and having to prioritize those needs:

> *"It was so hard to find a place that checked all of my boxes. Things that I wanted for my kid, that was affordable, that was close, that place doesn't exist for me….I had to sit down and do a big thing on what was really important to me and what was I willing to compromise on, which, when you're thinking about your child, is really hard to do. I ended up going further away from my house than I wanted to and spending a little bit more money, but then…doing fewer days…kind of doing this song and dance, trying to get what I wanted. And again, not having a lot of that information being made available easily really just made it very difficult."* – Family Focus Group Participant

One in four families says it's been harder to find high-quality care within their budget since the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Knowing that the COVID-19 pandemic had tremendous impacts on the ECE sector, we asked families to compare how easy it has been to find a high-quality ECE program within their budget since the pandemic started. Around one third of families said their recent experiences were about the same as their pre-pandemic experiences (37%; see Figure 8). However, one in four families said it has gotten somewhat or much harder to find quality care within their budget since the pandemic began.

Figure 8. Families' ease of finding a high-quality ECE program within their budget since the COVID-19 pandemic started (n=318)
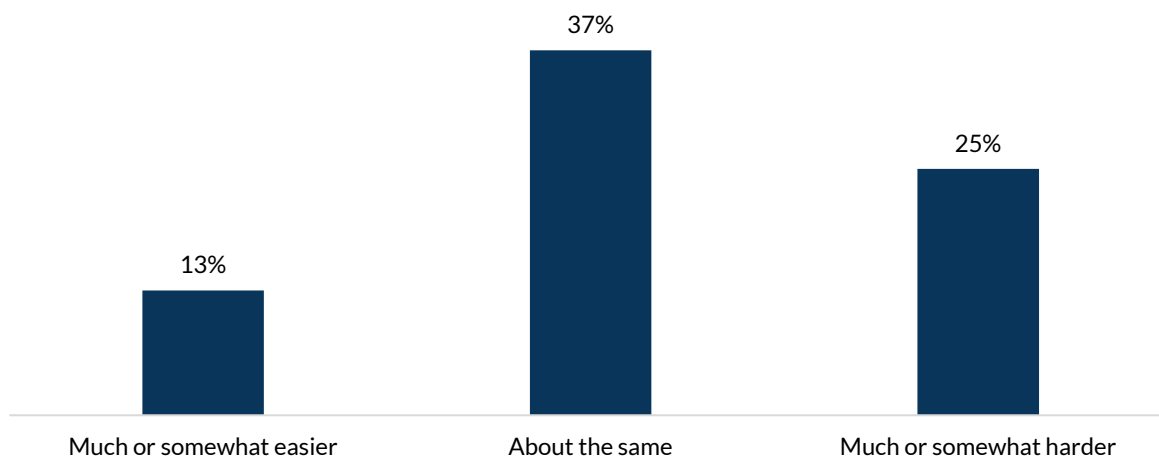
Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: Around one in four families chose "does not apply" to indicate that they had not searched for an ECE program before the COVID-19 pandemic started. Because of this, percentages do not total to 100.

When asked to explain what has made it harder to find a program within their budget, most families (64%) cited the rising cost of child care and other services, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some families (25%) also said they felt like ECE options had become more limited since the pandemic, sometimes noting that programs in their area had closed. Other families mentioned inflation and the rising cost of living.

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> *"Inflation is insane for everything. Child care costs are hard in general. Middle class doesn't qualify for assistance but then doesn't make enough to get ahead easily."* – Family Survey Respondent
>
> *"Child care is my biggest monthly expense. It is more expensive than my mortgage! For one child to go full-time and another child to go two days a week, the cost is $2,300! That's half of what I make every month."* – Family Survey Respondent
>
> *"Cost of everything has increased, from food to health and vehicle insurance."* – Family Survey Respondent

Families had to rely on family and friends for child care support or leave their jobs due to long waitlists to enroll in a child care program.

Many families in our focus groups described limited availability in child care due to long waitlists as a major challenge in their search for child care. Some reported joining waitlists during pregnancy to improve the chances of enrolling their child into a program. We then asked families to describe what happened when they could not find child care despite joining waitlists, and several shared piecing together family members' and friends' time to watch their children or having one parent stay at home until they secured permanent child care. One focus group participant described the experience of securing infant care and the time it took:

> *"It was really tough… we were on, I think about four or five different wait lists originally when we were trying to find infant care and we ended up being able to get her in at about nine months. But we just kind of had to do different schedules until we were able to get her in and we're kind of like broaden[ing] our horizons."*

Another participant in the family focus groups described her personal challenges finding care, including how she leaned on a community of family and friends during a long and frustrating process to secure infant care:

> *"I started looking for daycare when I was 2 months pregnant, and every single place that I called said that they had a 5 year wait list for infant care. They were like, 'well, I can put you on the list, but chances are nothing's gonna open up.' And then I had a myriad people that would come [help with child care], like my best friend helped for a bit. I'm a teacher at [a] public school, and so then I had a couple parents watching her for a bit. Then, when I finally did get into a home daycare, they closed probably 3-4 months after us being there. So, we [lost] child care again. Then, I brought her to our child care center that's in town, just as a temporary placeholder, but the cost is super expensive, so then I got her into another home daycare. They closed, and then we're back at the child care center, which has been great."* – Family Focus Group Participant

However, other families reported not having family or friends to help with child care. Some shared that they had to leave their current employment. One focus group participant shared that the waitlists were too long, and they could not wait any longer and did not have other options for support: *"We were not able to find infant daycare after she was born. So I actually had to quit my job because we couldn't find anything. Everything that's around here had at least a year or two wait list for infants. So yeah, I made the decision to quit because we couldn't find the care, didn't have family or anything around to help either."*

Many families navigated a complex and unclear process to secure permanent and consistent child care and often attributed their success to strategy and luck.

Families mentioned limited availability and challenges finding care that met their needs as key challenges in securing child care. Several family focus group participants shared how finding child care was rarely a straightforward process as availability and care preferences did not often coincide with each other. Therefore, some developed strategies to obtain child care such as joining waitlists once pregnant or establishing a relationship with a current ECE program to enroll another child in the future. One participant described utilizing both these strategies but still struggled to secure child care once her daughter was born:

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> *"Our first child, we had started looking for daycare as soon as I found out that I was pregnant, and we did not have full time care for her until she was 9 months old. So, it was well over a year for us to establish that. And then, even after that we went through like 3 different home daycares – kind of [for] the same reasons you guys had talked about. Like, you lower your standards a little bit just to get in somewhere, and then you wait until there's a better spot somewhere else and go there. So we kept kind of like creeping up to a better placement as she got older. Luckily, when our son was born, there was a spot at her same daycare... It was very hard for almost the first entire year of her life to not have stable care because we juggled between grandparents, friends, taking days off... That was just a lot of added stress."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Other families said they got lucky in obtaining child care, especially when a spot unexpectedly became available. One participant shared how she secured a spot as another family's plans did not materialize, but worried about finding care for other children in the future:

> *"We kind of lucked into our in home [provider]. I reached out to [the provider], she knew that I was expecting a baby before anyone in my family or friend group did, because I started my search very early. And it happened that a family she was planning to have fell through, and so we kind of lucked into that spot. But then there's just this lingering [feeling] of if we end up having more children, will we have availability at the same place, or are we going to have to go to two different places, pull our oldest child, and switch him to a new provider?"* – Family Focus Group Participant

Family-educator relationships and supporting children's development

In both the surveys and focus groups, we also asked a series of questions about the relationship between families and early educators and how that relationship can support a variety of needs, including to promote children's healthy learning and development.

Children's learning and development

In both surveys, we asked families and educators about children's learning and development in five areas: motor development, physical health, early learning skills, social-emotional development, and self-regulation.[16] Of note, in the family survey, families responded to these questions about their own child, whereas in the educator survey, early educators responded about all the preschool-aged children in their program. Further, many respondents from center-based programs were not teachers who directly worked with children, but instead were in an administrative or leadership position, meaning their involvement in day-to-day activities with children may vary.

Most families and educators feel that children are on track across most domains of learning and development.

When asked about the areas in which children have shown they are "on track" in their learning and development in the last year, families had slightly different views compared to those of educators.[17] As shown in Figure 9, across program types, early educators most often said that children were developmentally on track when it came to motor development (83%), followed by physical health (79%) and early learning skills (75%). Regarding children's socioemotional development and self-regulation skills, however, fewer center educators rated children as on track compared to family child care educators.

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[16] These areas are aligned with the Healthy and Ready to Learn measure, a child assessment measure.
[17] We asked educators to think specifically about the preschool-aged children enrolled in their program.

In contrast, families most often reported that their children were on track in their early learning skills (84%), social-emotional development (76%), and motor development (75%). About half of families felt that their children's self-regulation (53%) and physical health (44%) were on track.

Figure 9. Areas where early educators and families think children are developmentally on track in the last year (n=733)
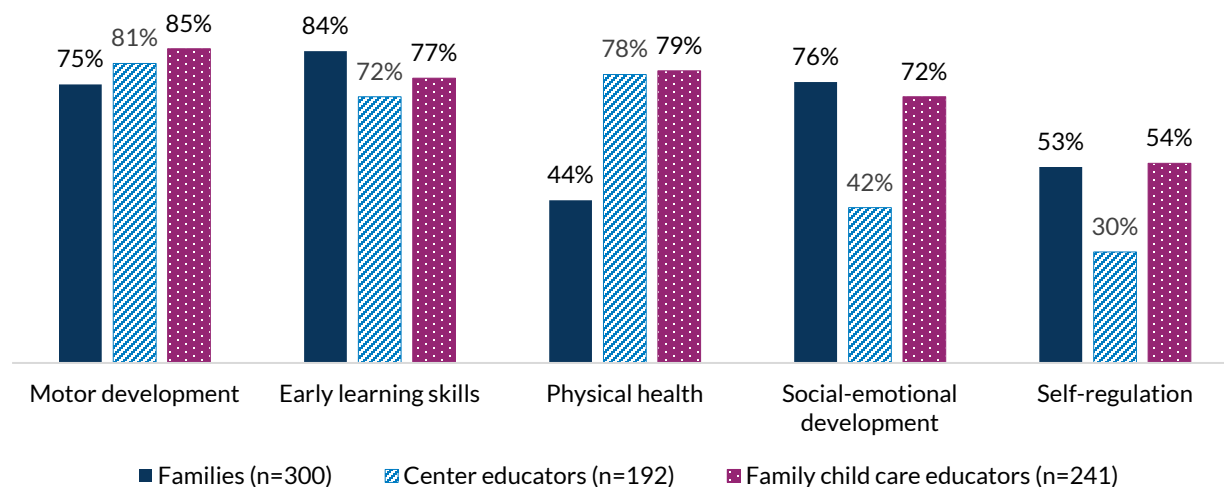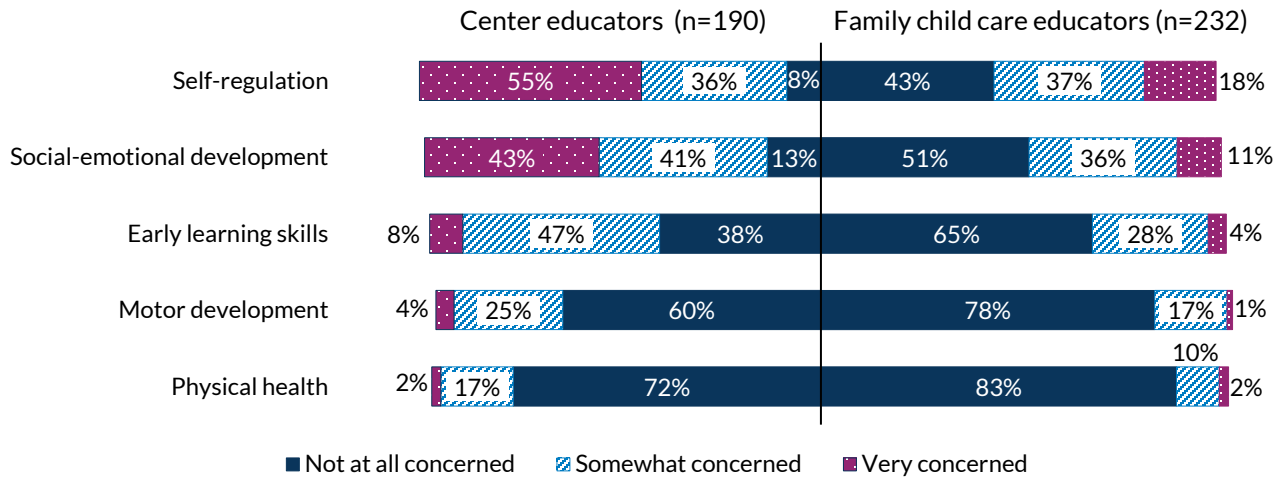

Source: Child Trends Family & Early Educator Surveys (2024)

Early educators, especially center educators, had more concerns about children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills than families.

Relatedly, we also asked families and educators about their concerns regarding children's learning and development in the same five areas of development described above. Both educators in center-based and family child care programs were more concerned about children's self-regulation and social-emotional development compared to their early learning skills, motor development, and physical health (see Figure 10). However, there were some notable differences by program type. More than half of center educators were very concerned about children's self-regulation skills (55%) compared to only around one in five family child care educators (18%). Similarly, 43 percent of center educators were very concerned about children's social-emotional development compared to only 11 percent of family child care educators.

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Figure 10. Early educators' concerns about preschool-aged children's development, by program type (n=422)

Center educators (n=190)   Family child care educators (n=232)

Self-regulation	55% 36% 8%	43% 37% 18%
Social-emotional development	43% 41% 13%	51% 36% 11%
Early learning skills	8% 47% 38%	65% 28% 4%
Motor development	4% 25% 60%	78% 17% 1%
Physical health	2% 17% 72%	83% 10% 2%

■ Not at all concerned   ▨ Somewhat concerned   ▨ Very concerned
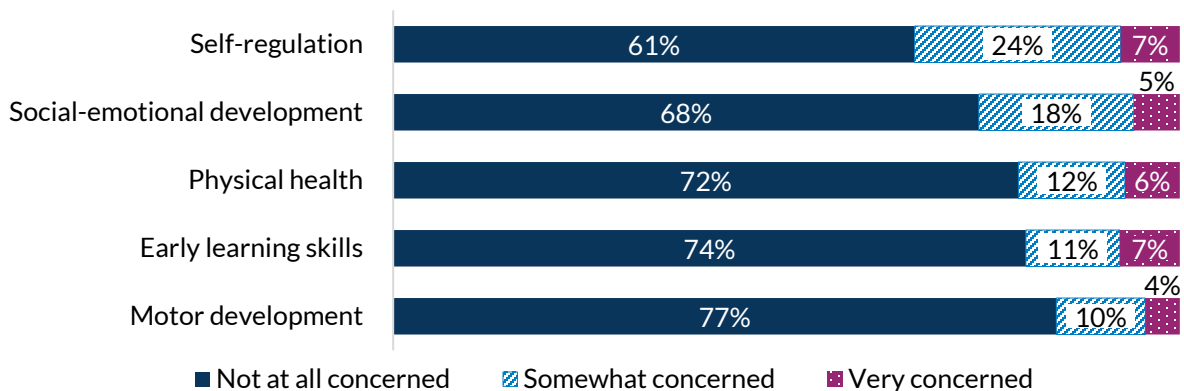
Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

In focus groups, many educators mentioned seeing more challenging behaviors and having more concerns about developmental delays among the children they care for now compared to before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some educators reported seeing children as "more boisterous" with "screaming fits" and "diminished attention spans," and others mentioned frequently supporting children with speech delays, difficulty regulating emotions, overstimulation, and challenges with social skills.

Compared to educators, relatively fewer families had concerns about their children's learning and development. Across the five developmental areas, 60 percent of families or more said they had no concerns about their children's progress (see Figure 11). In line with the findings from the early educator survey, the two developmental areas families had the most concerns about were children's self-regulation (31% somewhat or very concerned) and social-emotional development (23% somewhat or very concerned). However, families' concerns were less prevalent than educators' in that less than 10 percent of families said they were very concerned about any one domain.

Figure 11. Families' concerns about their children's development (n=301)

Self-regulation	61% 24% 7%
Social-emotional development	68% 18% 5%
Physical health	72% 12% 6%
Early learning skills	74% 11% 7%
Motor development	77% 10% 4%

■ Not at all concerned   ▨ Somewhat concerned   ▨ Very concerned

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

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Some families and educators say their concerns about children's development are related to the COVID-19 pandemic and lost learning time, while others are concerned about children's reliance on technology.

In the survey, some early educators and families provided additional information as to why they were concerned about children's learning and development in the areas indicated above. A few families (n=13) shared that their child had a specific health condition or developmental disability that was related to their concerns. Most often, families (n=31) and educators (n=32) mentioned their concerns were related in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, including its impacts on children's experiences in ECE (e.g., program closures, a lack of social time with other children) and on their health (and mental health) overall:

> *"Get's [sic] sick a lot or is exposed to sick kids a lot, inconsistent schedule because of daycare closing a lot so she struggles with self-regulation due to the inconsistent schedule of the week sometimes."* – Family Survey Respondent

> *"I am concerned about my child's social development because during COVID he lost a lot of social time. So, after COVID I spent a lot of time bring my son out and trying to get him to be more social. it worked for the most part, but it still needs some work."* – Family Survey Respondent

> *"The current preschoolers were babies at the beginning of the pandemic. The majority of the room has a hard time coping when things don't go their way and will throw long screaming fits that were not behaviors we used to see often in this age group."* – Educator Survey Respondent

Early educators in focus groups noted technology being a bigger problem than in the past, as families are used to its presence and often use it as a tool for soothing children. In turn, educators suspected children's difficulties regulating emotions have increased because they haven't learned to cope without technology.

> *"I think we see a lot of parents that rely on screen time to take care of their kids. And when they come into Preschool and [are] not used to being with a group of kids or in a setting, it's a challenge because they're used to having that stimulation from screen time instead of hands-on learning. So that's been a little bit of a different parenting that we're seeing."* – Center Educator Focus Group Participant

Some educators who responded to the survey also perceived that their concerns about children's learning and development were related to things happening in children's homes. For example, some educators had concerns about parenting styles and parent's knowledge of how to effectively support their children's behavior (n=33), others were worried about children's screen time (n=22), and some mentioned that family challenges (e.g., divorce or financial strain) or parental stress could be a factor in children's development (n=22).

> *"Self-Regulation becomes a big issue in a classroom when there are only 1 or 2 children needing specialized care. Partnerships with outside resources help, but parents are not always open or willing to this feedback."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent
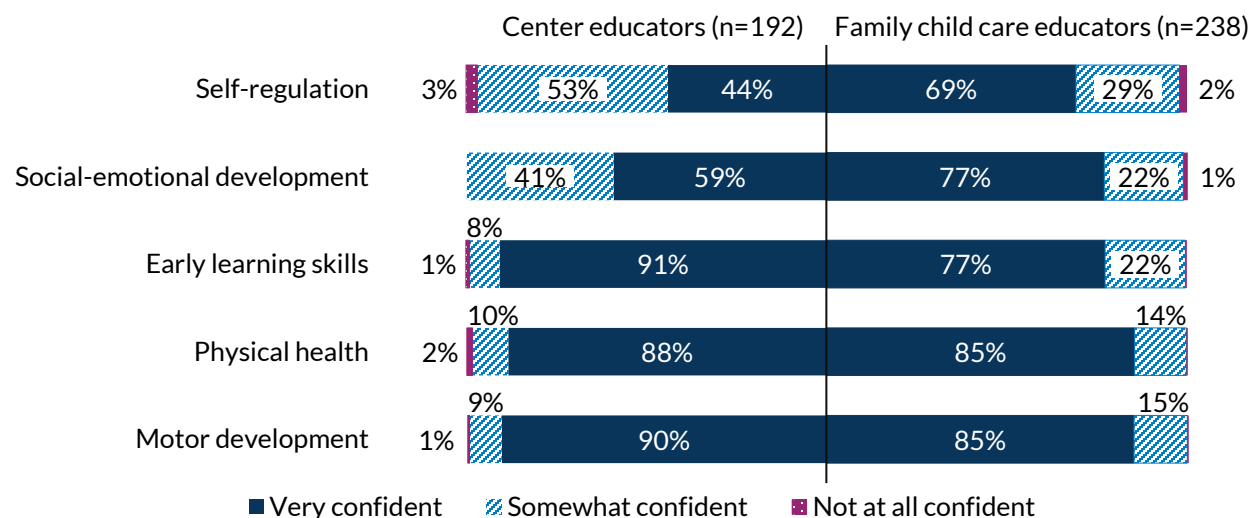
> *"Our students are COVID babies who are attending school or social events for the first time. Many of these students have limited to no exposure of playing with peers. In addition, many were raised with screens to entertain or parent so many students are struggling to follow basic rules that were attainable prior to COVID."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Educators experience high stress and feel less confident about supporting children's social-emotional development and behavioral issues.

Next, our surveys asked early educators how they felt about their abilities to support children in their learning and development. In alignment with educators' concerns about the different domains of children's development, educators more often reported feeling confident in supporting children's motor development,

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physical health, and early learning skills (see Figure 12). Educators felt less confident in their abilities to support children's self-regulation and social-emotional development. Mirroring the finding that center educators are more often concerned about children's development in these areas, center educators also felt less confident supporting children's development in these areas than family child care educators.

Figure 12. Early educators' confidence in supporting children's learning and development (n=430)

Center educators (n=192) Family child care educators (n=238)

		Center educators (n=192)		Family child care educators (n=238)	
Self-regulation	3%	53%	44%	69%	29% 2%
Social-emotional development		41%	59%	77%	22% 1%
Early learning skills	1%	8%	91%	77%	22%
Physical health	2%	10%	88%	85%	14%
Motor development	1%	9%	90%	85%	15%

■ Very confident   ▨ Somewhat confident   ▨ Not at all confident

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

When asked what additional supports educators needed to feel confident in supporting children's learning and development, survey respondents most often mentioned more staff or more training for staff (n=7); support with mental health, social-emotional learning, and behavior management (n=3); and more support and buy-in from families (n=3).

Similarly, in the early educator focus groups, many educators noted feeling increased stress and being overwhelmed due to the increase in behavioral challenges, specifically citing social-emotional development and self-regulation as main areas of concerns. Some educators mentioned employing new strategies such as more outside time, active transitions between activities, and breathing exercises to address these concerns. Other educators shared that they have needed to overstaff their programs and do more staff training to better support the increased number of children with challenging behaviors or developmental delays.

Families and early educators work in partnership to effectively support children's learning and development.

In focus groups, educators emphasized the importance of working with families to address any concerns about children's learning and development, though noted some difficulties in this area. Some educators felt like families did not share the same level of concern about what was developmentally appropriate for their child. Educators shared reasons like the environment or context of child care is different than at home, so the same behaviors might not come up or may be responded to differently. Other educators noted that families may not have a reference point of other children's behavior to compare their child to and know what is developmentally appropriate. As one educator described:

> *"In a lot of the cases, at least where I am in the families that I have, I feel like parents are less concerned. They think it might be normal that their four-year-old still wakes up at night a lot and, doesn't sleep in their bed. . .Some families are definitely different from that, but I'd say the majority of them, they're just too busy to at least follow through on a concern." –* Family Child Care Educator Focus Group Participant

Early educators in focus groups also noticed families experiencing more difficulties with parenting since the COVID-19 pandemic. Educators are seeing parents express both an increased desire for education to recognize what behaviors are developmentally appropriate, and also education on how to manage challenging behaviors (e.g., techniques to help children self-regulate). Some educators observed parents having a harder time saying no and setting limits or boundaries for their children. A couple of educators shared that they have also observed some parents wanting more help parenting, which has shifted their role as an educator. For example, a family child care educator explained that, *"a lot more of my time goes into encouraging teaching, answering questions, just about parenting in general, too."*

However, many families in focus groups shared that they felt it is an early educator's responsibility not only to communicate children's learning and development but also to provide routine and structure to children's learning. Most families viewed this as a partnership with educators to work together and strategize how to support their child both at home and during child care. One participant described this relationship:

> *"I think there needs to be a lot of partnership between the parents and the providers. I think sometimes, at least from my experience, I see, you know, parents just kind of drop off and think, OK, that's the provider's problem now. And you know, some of those things that are happening at the provider's house aren't necessarily transitioned at home. So that's very confusing for kids."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Families also noted in focus groups that having an open line of communication with educators is another important element to their partnership in supporting children's learning. As another participant described it:

> *"I think parent expectations can differ so much between families that providers might also feel like they're doing too much or not enough for, you know, someone specific child and that child's needs. Nobody likes to feel like their child is being hovered over or pinpointed as a 'problem' or something like that. Having that open line of communication just to know where both parties stand and what the common goals are."* – Family Focus Group Participant

When there is a difference in concerns between families and educators, early educators in focus groups shared that they need to work harder to build strong and trusting relationships with those families and get on the same page about any next steps for their children (e.g., developmental screening or early intervention services). They noted some families are hesitant to follow through with screening due to a variety of reasons: navigating their own emotional reactions, not wanting their child to be labeled a certain way, not noticing the same developmental concerns as educators or taking their concerns as seriously, or not wanting to screen their child multiple times. As one educator explained:

> *"The ball is in the parents' side of the court, and they have to be the one to agree and move forward. So I just continue to say, keep documenting, keep documenting, make the documentation train. Because at some point the information will get to somebody who can move forward with it. And it's been challenging because again understanding the stages of loss or grief and acceptance that sometimes parents need to go through to hear, 'hey, your kid's having some difficulties or some challenges, or we're needing to support them in different ways.' I would say majority of our families really have a hard time hearing that and wanting to work with us on that."* – Center Educator Focus Group Participant

To start conversations about screenings with families, educators employ a range of strategies. Many educators hold conferences with families, and one educator said they send an email as a starting point for the conversation to allow time for the families to process beforehand. A few educators commented that they have positive partnerships with local school districts and early intervention services that help them get screenings and referrals for children who need them. After families agree to screenings, educators commonly access or refer families to the following resources:

- Head Start screenings
- Bright Future social workers (housing stabilization support)

- Help Me Grow
- Center for Inclusive Childcare
- School districts and school Individualized Education Plans
- Special education teachers
- Mental health consultants
- Early intervention (e.g., speech therapists, occupational therapists)

Families most often turn to their health care or ECE program for support related to their children's development, but cost and availability of services are barriers to getting support.

Next, we asked families about where they go for support for their children's learning and development when they have questions. As shown in Table 15, most families reported going to a health care provider or doctor (77%), followed by their child care provider (i.e., "early educator"; 66%). Other common sources of support also included a family member or relative (45%), online resources (46%), and other parents (29%).

Table 15. Where families go for support related to their children's learning and development (n=302)

Source of support	All families (n=302)
Health care provider or doctor	77%
My child care provider or caregiver	66%
Family member or relative	45%
Online resources/internet search	46%
Other parents	29%
Parent Aware website	9%
A community organization	4%
I do not know	3%
I would not seek answers or support from other places	1%
Other	1%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Further, when asked about barriers to receiving support for their children, families most commonly mentioned cost (66%), followed by lack of availability of services (43%; see Table 16).

Table 16. Families' barriers to receiving support for their children's learning and development (n=277)

Barriers	All families (n=277)
Cost	66%
Services are at capacity/have waiting lists	43%
I don't have time	34%
I don't feel comfortable asking for help	18%
Lack of transportation or other access (such as internet)	15%
There are no services in my area	18%
Translation/interpretation services aren't available	5%
Another barrier (e.g., limited options in their area)	5%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Families feel comfortable discussing various topics with their early educators, and educators' caring nature, attentiveness, approachability, and communication styles facilitate such conversations.

Next, we asked families about their relationship with their current ECE program and their child's primary early educator. Specifically, we asked about how often families communicate with someone from their ECE program regarding different topics, such as their children's experiences and behaviors, problems or concerns, learning activities, and goals for their children's learning and development. Some of the most frequent discussions involved children's experiences while in care, their learning and development, their behaviors, their physical health, curriculum, and scheduling changes. These conversations were reportedly taking place weekly or more often with at least 50 percent of the families and their early educators. Conversations about the family's cultural beliefs and traditions and the importance of attending school were some of the least discussed topics. Thirty four percent of families reported never having discussed their family's beliefs and traditions with their early educators, and 24 percent of families reported never talking about attendance and the importance of attending school. Table 17 presents how frequently different topics reportedly get discussed among families and early educators, according to families who responded to the survey.

Table 17. Frequency of families' communication with early educators regarding different issues and experiences at their ECE program (n=301)

Communication topics	Weekly or more often	Monthly or less often	Never
Your child's experiences in child care	88%	11%	1%
Your child's behavior (social and emotional skills, relationships, communication)	78%	19%	2%
Your child's learning and development	70%	28%	1%
Your child's physical health	63%	27%	9%
Formal child care arrangements[a] only: Curriculum or learning activities	50%	26%	4%
Formal child care arrangements[a] only: Scheduling changes (closures, field trips, special events)	50%	24%	5%
Goals you have for your child	43%	45%	11%
What to expect at each stage of your child's development	36%	48%	14%
Formal child care arrangements only: Attendance/importance of attending	34%	20%	24%
My family's beliefs and traditions	33%	30%	34%
Your vision for your child's future	30%	48%	19%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: "Formal child care arrangements" include care provided at a child care center, family child care, Head Start, or school-based Pre-K program. Families who reported using an informal arrangement, such as care provided by a family member, friend, or nanny, were not shown these items.

Further, when families were asked about their comfort discussing different experiences with their early educators, most said that they were very or somewhat comfortable talking to their early educator about most topics. Less than 10 percent of families reported being "somewhat uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" talking to their provider about any topic except for their family's customs and cultural practices (12%; see Table 18).

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Table 18. Comfort communicating about child's experiences with early educator (n=299)

Communication topics	Somewhat or very uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Very comfortable
My child's physical health	8%	14%	77%
My child's early learning skills	8%	15%	76%
My child's motor development	7%	17%	75%
My child's social-emotional development	8%	19%	72%
My child's self-regulation	8%	20%	71%
My family's customs or cultural practices	12%	21%	65%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

In the survey, we also asked families to explain what their ECE program or early educator does to help them feel comfortable discussing these topics, or conversely, what they could do to make them feel more comfortable. Families most often mentioned early educators' communication styles and relational skills—such as being caring or attentive, friendly, approachable, and communicative—as making them much more comfortable discussing topics related to their child's development. A few families also mentioned the importance of feeling like their early educator listens to them and affirming that most concerns are normal in that every child develops at their own pace.

Similarly, most families in the focus groups shared that they feel comfortable bringing up any concerns about their children's learning and development. However, a select few families noted that they would feel uncomfortable due to fear of retaliation. One parent shared her hesitation:

> *"I feel like I have experienced some hesitation in the past to bring up anything, whether it's like any kind of concern because I know how difficult it is to find child care and I don't wanna offend or upset or rock the boat in any way because I don't want either my child to be treated differently, especially the one who has mental health diagnosis. I guess I just have a fear in whether it's valid or not that somehow we will get kicked out of daycare or that we will be treated in a different way that will cause us to seek daycare elsewhere. So in the past I, unless it's really something to do with safety. Umm, I kind of try to avoid too, like bringing up too many concerns because I just wanna stay on my provider's good side."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Early educators in focus groups reflected similar thoughts around the relationships they have with families in their program. Overall, educators shared that they have good relationships with the families in their program, and that those relationships are important to them and something they prioritize. The strength of the relationship can depend on the tenure of the staff (i.e., newer staff are still establishing relationships while veteran staff have stronger relationships) and how directly their role interacts with families. Specifically, educators in smaller towns/rural areas noted they often take care of generations of families, which contributes to the strength of the relationship. Most educators said the strength of their relationships with families has either not changed or even gotten better since COVID-19 due to more face-to-face contact. However, one educator mentioned having to work a little harder and another mentioned communication was difficult when COVID-19 first hit. As one educator expressed:

> *"I feel like it's been easier to chat with parents now that they're able to come into the building. We were doing a car line at some point and then when we advanced from that to the letting them come into the center, they dropped off at the door. So the teacher was always at the door and now just having kind of less restrictions, just feels like it's a more organic and natural opportunity to have conversations at drop off and pick up. So that has helped immensely."* – Center Educator Focus Group Participant

Some center educators put on a few bigger events outside of child care throughout the year to connect with families (e.g., picnics, holiday get-togethers, gatherings for new enrollees, beginning of the year kickoffs). Some educators noted that families are less involved with these events than they have been in the past or before the COVID-19 pandemic. They shared difficulties getting families to volunteer or show up, or that

generally the events can be "hit or miss." However, some family child care educators shared they did not put on events due to capacity constraints (e.g., smaller program).

Outside of events, educators engaged with families in various ways including newsletters, phone calls, conferences, and pick-up/drop-off times. Educators that used mobile applications (e.g., Seesaw, BrightWheel) felt they are well-received by families and helpful for consistent two-way communication. There were mixed opinions about the success of connecting with families during pick-up/drop off; one educator noted that families are quick to get in and out, while another educator said it was a more natural way to have conversations with families.

Families in focus groups also had mixed feelings on the best form of communication with their ECE program/early educator. Some families preferred communicating in person but noted that the individual who is present at pick up may be different from who interacts with their child during the day, so it would not be beneficial. Some also added that the pick-up and drop-off times can be too chaotic to try to talk with the educator.

Educators supporting families' needs outside of ECE

Few families receive referrals from their early educator, but those who do most often need help paying for child care, early intervention services, and food and nutrition assistance.

In the survey, we also asked questions about how ECE programs support families' needs, including needs outside of ECE. Table 19 shows families' responses to whether they had ever received information or a referral from someone at their ECE program to help them meet various needs, and Table 20 shows the types of needs early educators reported talking to families about. Of note, few families reported getting referrals from their ECE program (8-20%, depending on the type of referral). Although slightly more families reported receiving referrals from somewhere else (12-28%), the majority of families reported not receiving referrals from anywhere (57-76%). Both families and educators mentioned discussing or receiving support related to developmental screenings, child care assistance, and food and nutrition assistance. Across types of services, families with lower incomes were generally more likely than families with higher incomes to report getting information or referrals from their ECE program or from another source. This theme is reflected in the educator focus groups, with early educators who described having a large population of families with lower incomes reporting that they received more requests for additional resources outside of paying for child care.

Table 19. Families receiving information or referrals from someone at their ECE programs (n=295)

Information/Referrals	Percent of families who received referral from their ECE program		
	Families with lower incomes (n=108)	Families with higher incomes (n=178)	Overall (n=295)
Developmental screenings, early intervention services, or kindergarten transitions	24%	18%	20%
Child care assistance (e.g., help applying for subsidy)	18%	16%	18%
Food and nutrition assistance	19%	14%	16%
Transportation	19%	7%	12%
Health care	12%	10%	11%
Employment assistance (e.g., unemployment benefits, support with job search or training)	9%	8%	9%
Mental health services	8%	9%	9%

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Information/Referrals	Percent of families who received referral from their ECE program		
	Families with lower incomes (n=108)	Families with higher incomes (n=178)	Overall (n=295)
Housing (e.g., assistance with rent payments or deferment)	10%	6%	8%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Across areas of families' needs, a higher proportion of center educators reported talking to families about each need compared to family child care educators (see Table 20). For example, 63 percent of center educators reported discussing developmental screenings or early intervention services with families while 36 percent of family child care educators reported having such discussions. Additionally, 53 percent of center educators reported discussing options for child care payments while 45 percent of family child care educators reported such discussions with families.

Table 20. Early educator reports of types of needs discussed with families (n=433)

Needs discussed	Center educators (n=192)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
Help paying for child care	53%	45%	48%
Developmental screenings or early intervention services	63%	36%	48%
Food and nutrition assistance	44%	32%	37%
Mental health services	43%	15%	27%
Health care	24%	15%	19%
Housing	25%	14%	19%
Transportation	39%	12%	24%
Employment assistance	21%	12%	16%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: A few educators wrote in another need they have discussed with their families (n=18), including, most commonly, clothing and financial assistance with energy and heating costs.

In addressing families' needs outside of child care, early educators in focus groups shared experiences of connecting families to resources that varied widely due to the geographic setting (i.e., urban vs. rural) and the type of program (i.e., Head Start vs. child care center). Services included transportation, dental care, food, financial planning/management, housing, and medical need support for families who are undocumented. Educators shared that they have connected families to resources such as Early Learning Scholarships, crisis nursery for diapers, or food banks. One educator described the Early Learning Scholarships as being "life changing for parents."

Some ECE programs with ties to community partners do not need to facilitate connection to external resources. Yet, even with assistance from external sources, one family child care educator noted that some families are still struggling: *"I have a lot of families that do get some benefits, [but] they're just not making it."*

In the focus groups, educators explained that they spend time connecting families to resources because they know families may not always get the information directly. Many educators do their best to make sure that families have the resources they need because they believe it is a part of their role as an early educator—to be in service of both children and their families. As one center educator shared, *"Our job isn't just to check care for the kids. It's to care for the families as well."*

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More than one in four early educators rely on connections with local organizations or online resources (including the Parent Aware website) to provide families with referrals or information.

Survey findings highlight that early educators not only regularly talk to families about their various needs, but also frequently give families information or referrals to services to help them meet their specific needs. Educators were asked if they have ever provided families with a referral or information to help connect them with needed services, and most (77%; 92% of center educators and 64% of family child care educators) indicated that they had. Of these, the frequency in which educators provided referrals to families is summarized in Table 21. There was some variation across program types such that more center educators reported giving referrals at least once (92% compared to 64%) and also reported giving referrals more frequently than family child care educators (30% reporting monthly or more compared to 9% of family child care educators). Among early educators who reported not giving families a referral, the most commonly cited reason for this was knowing that the family already had the information (n=7).

Table 21. Frequency with which early educators talk to families about referrals/information

Frequency	Center educators (n=177)	Family child care educators (n=155)	Overall (n=332)
Weekly	6%	3%	5%
Monthly	24%	6%	15%
Every few months	38%	22%	30%
Once or twice a year	33%	69%	50%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

In the survey, early educators also shared where they go for support getting information or referrals for families. As shown in Table 22, educators most commonly reported looking online (36%), having connections with local organizations that provide services for families (29%), or using the Parent Aware website (27%). Compared to family child care educators, center educators more commonly mentioned connections with local organizations (42% compared to 19%), as well as asking colleagues at their program for support (35% compared to 6%).

Table 22. Where early educators go for support to provide families information or referrals for services (n=433)

| Support to find referrals/information for families	Center educators (n=192)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
I look online for information about local services	38%	35%	36%
I know of or have connections with local organizations that provide these services[a]	42%	19%	29%
I use ParentAware.org	23%	31%	27%
I ask a friend who also works in the early care and education field	16%	23%	20%
I ask a colleague at my program	35%	6%	19%
I use Help Me Connect Minnesota's online navigator for families	24%	11%	17%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

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Most families feel confident in their early educators' ability to connect them to needed resources and services—including to support their needs outside of ECE.

Among families who reported in the survey that they had received information or a referral for any type of service from their ECE program, most families said they were very satisfied (58%) or somewhat satisfied (24%; see Figure 13).

Figure 13. Families' satisfaction with referrals received from their ECE program (n=110)
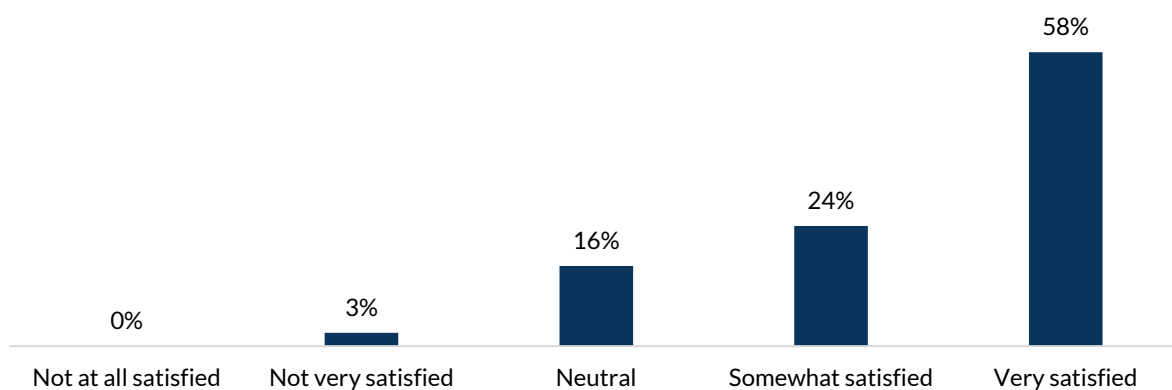
Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Regardless of whether families reported receiving a referral from their ECE program, we asked all families how confident they felt that their current ECE program would be able to connect them with information or referrals to the resources and services their family needs. Most families were confident or very confident in their programs' abilities (35% and 39% respectively; see Figure 14).

Figure 14. Families' confidence in their ECE programs' ability to refer them to needed services (n=293)
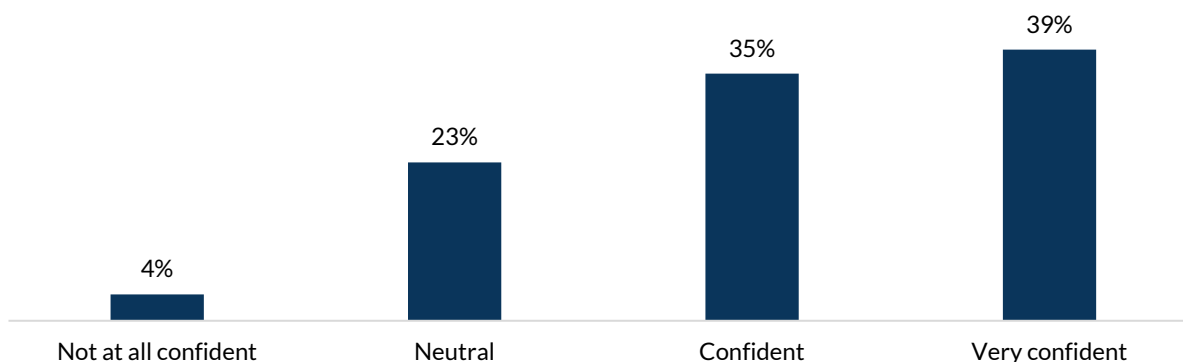
Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

Similarly, during the focus groups, families noted how valuable early educators are with their knowledge of local community resources, but most did not expect them to provide referral services. Most families described this service as a "nice to have" as opposed to a requirement. One parent described this: "*I don't think it's their job. But, I do think as a community, the more we can partner together and provide resources to each*

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other, the better. My provider today actually just sent a text to all of her daycare families about scholarships that are available through this program. That's not her job … you know, but it's absolutely a bonus. But I wouldn't expect that from her, or I wouldn't punish her in any way if she wasn't doing those things that are above and beyond."

Some families flagged challenges with early educators supporting families with needs outside of child care such as educators' limited capacity and families' perception when receiving this service. One parent elaborated on why a family's perception could be an issue: "*Your provider probably has a lot of knowledge at their fingertips that they might not be sharing with you, and I think that sometimes it can feel weird to push these or recommend these resources to certain families because you don't ever want to assume."*

When asked if there was anything ECE programs could do to better to support families in meeting their needs, including needs outside of ECE, families most commonly mentioned that educators could share information about local services and programs with families either in written materials (44%) or at in-person meetings and events (38%; see Table 23). Some families (42%) said they want their early educators to ask them about their family's needs, rather than waiting for them to ask for help.

Table 23. How families think ECE programs can better support them in meeting their needs (n=199)

Supports	Percent of families
Share written information about local services and programs (e.g., posted on the program website, sent via email)	44%
Ask me about my family's other needs, rather than waiting for me to ask them	42%
Mention local services and programs during in-person meetings or events	38%
There is nothing my provider could do better in this area	7%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

What families and early educators need to thrive

Key stressors impacting families

More than half of early educators reported that families they serve are most commonly stressed due to financial strains and balancing work and personal responsibilities.

In the survey, early educators also reported on the biggest stressors they see in the families and children they currently serve (see Table 24). Almost half of all educators felt that financial strain or difficulty paying for child care (55%) and balancing work and personal or family responsibilities (51%) were among the biggest stressors families are facing. According to educators, families also face emotional and mental exhaustion and have concerns about their children's social and behavioral skills. Center educators were more likely to report concerns about children's social and behavioral skills as stressors for families compared to family child care educators (65% vs. 33%).

Table 24. Educators' reports of the biggest stressors impacting the children and families they serve

Stressors	Center educators (n=192)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
Financial strain or difficulty paying for child care	61%	50%	55%
Balancing work and personal/family responsibilities	48%	54%	51%
Concerns about children's social and behavioral skills	65%	33%	47%
Emotional and mental exhaustion	57%	34%	45%
Concerns about children's learning and development	31%	17%	23%
Divorce, separation, or other family instability	24%	16%	20%
Difficulty securing transportation to or from child care	30%	8%	18%
Concerns about health and safety	16%	19%	18%
Job loss, reduced hours, or job instability	12%	16%	14%
Adapting to changes in child care hours or scheduling	13%	15%	14%
Something else[a]	4%	5%	4%
I don't know	1%	7%	4%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100. [a] Other stressors that educators mentioned as impacting families included instability in ECE (finding care; the impact of staff turnover on children; n=6), concerns about children's mental health (n=3), and other family circumstances like divorce or job/financial/housing insecurity (n=6).

Educators shared similar themes in the focus groups, specifically seeing stress from families balancing child care and working. Multiple educators noted an additional layer of stress is that some families in their program struggle to keep government benefits such as child care subsidy or food stamps but may need to take on another job to pay their bills. As a result, there may be a gap between a families' income and their living expenses such that they make "too much" to qualify for assistance but not enough to cover their basic needs. Further, the cost and availability of child care were also highlighted by educators as stressors for families. One educator shared that in their conversations with families, they hear that, as a result of families feeling as though there are few options for child care, families also "feel forced" to use arrangements that may not align with their wants or needs.

> *"We're a Parent Aware program, can accept scholarship money, but it's kind of those families that are in the gap between their living expenses [or] debt that they may have, is too high to really be able to afford what they would like. But also their income level is too high to qualify [for child care subsidy], so I feel like there is kind of that window in there that's a little bit harder for them."* — Center Educator Focus Group Participant

More than half of educators identified needing support on children's social, emotional, and behavioral development.

Next, we asked early educators about what support their program needs in order to help support children and families with unique needs. Educators were asked to pick the top three needs from the list in Table 25. Overall, educators most commonly reported needing support for children's social, emotional, and behavioral development (58%), followed by support to improve the facility where they provide care (35% of center educators, reported so about their facility and 50% family child care educators reported so about their homes), and for connecting families with resources (23%).

Table 25. Most common needs of programs for supporting children's unique needs

Program needs	Center educators (n=183)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=424)
Supporting children's social, emotional, and behavioral development	75%	46%	58%
Making improvements to my child care facility / my home where I provide care	35%	50%	44%
Connecting families with resources to meet their needs outside of child care	26%	21%	23%
Centers only: Attracting a diverse staff that reflects the families we serve	22%	n/a	22%
Supporting children's transitions to kindergarten	13%	24%	19%
Supporting families with applying for financial assistance (e.g., CCAP subsidies, Early Learning Scholarships)	17%	17%	17%
Engaging and communicating with families	15%	13%	14%
Defining and using equitable disciplinary practices	11%	9%	10%
Finding and using culturally relevant learning materials and curricula	13%	7%	10%
Meeting health and safety requirements	5%	6%	6%
Training on inclusive and equitable practices	8%	4%	6%
Using assessment data to individualize instruction	5%	4%	4%
Using observational data (e.g., from CLASS® or ERS) for quality improvement	5%	2%	3%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Families shared uniquely helpful things their ECE programs do related to communication and additional engagement activities for their children.

During the focus groups, we asked families to share some things that their ECE program or early educator does that are uniquely helpful to them. Most families shared how the use of a mobile application to communicate and receive updates on their children has been uniquely helpful; one parent shared: *"I think it's pretty typical of center-based care, our [program] has an app so you see what [children] eat, when they go to the bathroom, if they're young enough, they'll communicate with messages via that [app]. That's very helpful, especially*

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when you're potty training and that type of thing." Other uniquely helpful supports that families cited were additional engagement activities such as family events and hanging out with "grand friends" where children interact with elderly from a nearby nursing home. A few families also noted schedule flexibility as another key support from their ECE programs, which includes extended hours or offering to babysit children when families need care outside the program's regular hours. One parent shared how this additional flexibility has been beneficial: "*I'd say probably just the biggest thing, [is] just the overall flexibility. Like, if something comes up and OK, we're gonna be 1/2 hour late picking him up or his doctor's appointment got cancelled, can he stay for an extra hour? How late can you stay?*"

Key stressors impacting early educators

Staffing was a major stressor for center educators; personal stress and a lack of benefits were common stressors for educators in both center-based and family child care programs.

The extent to which educators reported experiencing common stressors or challenges varied by their program type. Center educators reported that staffing was the most common stressor they experienced (64%), whereas family child care educators reported personal stress as the most challenging (57%), followed by daily work (47%). Table 26 presents the proportions of educators who reported facing these different stressors/challenges. When probed further, about one in four early educators faced minimal to no impact on their stress levels (28%) and three in four educators faced moderate to significant impact on their stress levels (72%).

Table 26. Top two stressors/challenges faced by early educators

Stressors/challenges	Center educators (n=192)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
Centers only: Staffing	64%	n/a	64%
Personal stress	34%	57%	47%
Day-to-day work	43%	47%	45%
Difficulties managing business operations	23%	39%	32%
Concerns about the health and safety	8%	18%	14%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select their top two stressors, so percentages may not total to 100.

The early educator focus groups echoed themes around staffing and workforce stress. Most educators mentioned workforce challenges they have either personally experienced or seen across the Minnesota child care landscape. Many educators had issues with finding qualified staff or staff willing to work for lower pay. One educator also talked about challenges in finding substitute educators when a staff person is out sick or has to stay home with their sick child. A couple of educators explained the tension between keeping costs low for families but also wanting to pay their staff higher wages. As one educator described:

> "*...Lots of our families...they pay on time, but it still is a huge expense for them and the flip side of that is our staff are very underpaid for what their qualifications are and for what their jobs are. And the only way, as a privately run program to change that is to continue to raise tuition, which then ends up being passed on to the parents, which then ends up making things more difficult for them. And if we don't do that, we struggle keeping really amazing teachers with us because they can't afford to work in this industry.*" – Center Educator Focus Group Participant

Some educators also shared that they are also spending a lot of money and time recruiting and hiring staff. One educator compared it to a "revolving door" with how quickly new staff come and then leave. Some

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mentioned that long hours seemed to be a drawback for new staff, and also wondered if some applicants may be unaware of the full responsibilities of the role—particularly for those new to the field. Another educator mentioned spending "$1,000 a month" on Indeed to have a competitive post when they were trying to hire new staff. Educators noted strategies they use to help potential staff get qualified such as paying for Child Development Associate (CDA) credentials.

Multiple educators recalled strategies they implemented to both recruit and retain staff. One educator explained that their program is closing for the day for staff to learn about compassion fatigue and participate in team building. Other educators have increased the number of holidays or given their staff "wellness days." Another educator talked about their implementation of a "Life Essentials Fund" where staff can request a certain amount of money based on their hours worked for whatever they may need. Since they started the Fund, their staff have been requesting money for dental bills or for their kids. This educator also started snack carts in their center and due to these changes, they have seen high morale across all of their locations. Other educators made a move to purposefully keep their ratios low so that they can keep staff. As one center educator explained, *"So we're really just trying to find things that can support staff, even if it's an extra 15-minute break and even if it's from me and it's taking up my time. But if it keeps them grounded and feeling good about their position, I feel like it's worth it."* Other examples of retention strategies include:

- Staff prep time
- 1:1 meetings with classroom staff to touch base on what is going on and what they need
- Increased team building and skill building opportunities
- Respecting staff, making them feel like they matter, and working with them to solve problems

We also asked early educators what supports or resources would help them better manage the stressors they reported on. Overall, educators reported that increased pay, sick leave or personal time off, or health benefits (56%), and financial assistance or grants (54%) would be helpful supports. A little over half of center educators reported that help recruiting or retaining qualified staff would be helpful (58%). More family child care educators reported that increased subsidy reimbursement rates would be helpful (23%) than center educators (15%). One in ten early educators felt that no additional resources were needed as they felt well supported (see Table 27).

Table 27. Support or resources for stress management

Support or resources	Center educators (n=192)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
Centers only: Help recruiting or retaining qualified staff	58%	n/a	58%
Increased pay, sick leave/personal time off, or health benefits	54%	58%	56%
Financial assistance or grants	47%	60%	54%
Access to mental health and well-being resources	24%	22%	23%
Increased reimbursement rates for child care subsidy through the Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP)	15%	23%	19%
Professional development or training[a]	14%	8%	11%
None, I feel well supported	9%	12%	11%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: [a] Educators most commonly mentioned wanting virtual or self-paced training on the following topics: behavior management (n=7), children's mental health and social-emotional development (n=6), program administration/business management (n=4), and staff well-being (n=4).

We also asked early educators an open-ended question about what other kinds of supports and resources they need most right now, and responses largely mirrored the themes outlined above. Educators most often

mentioned needing financial assistance (n=35), help recruiting and retaining staff, including substitutes (n=23), and support to expand benefits at their program such as insurance and personal time off (n=12). A few other educators mentioned specific things they would like support with, such as advice to maximize the benefits from food programs, help with licensing, and more appreciation/acknowledgement for the crucial work that they do.

Early educators' perspectives on ECE and needed supports

Around 15 percent of early educators say they might leave their current job or the ECE field altogether within the next year—often citing low compensation, burdensome regulations, and a lack of respect for the profession as the main reasons they might leave.

When asked about career plans, 14 percent of family child care educators said they were likely to close their business or leave the ECE field entirely within the next year. Similar percentages of center educators reported they were likely to leave their current job (17%) or the ECE field (15%). Among the center educators who reported being likely to leave, around two thirds cited low compensation as their reason for leaving (64%; see Table 28). Other common reasons for center educators included lack of respect for their profession (44%), lack of benefits like health insurance (33%), burdensome licensing regulations (31%), and wanting to spend more time with their families (31%). Family child care educators reported similar reasons for closing their business or leaving the field, with the most common reason being licensing regulations (46%), followed by low compensation (43%), and lack of respect from others (31%). Notably, family child care educators were more likely to report feeling isolated as a reason for wanting to leave compared to center educators.

Table 28. Early educators' reasons for leaving their current job and/or the ECE field

Reasons	Center educators (n=39)	Family child care educators (n=35)
Compensation is too low	64%	43%
Lack of respect for the child care field/profession from others	44%	31%
Lack of health insurance or other benefits	33%	n/a
Licensing regulations are too burdensome	31%	46%
Wanting to spend more time with my family/own children	31%	37%
I do not have the professional supports I needed	15%	3%
I plan to retire	13%	17%
Lack of paid time off	10%	n/a
My own medical issues	10%	11%
I feel isolated	8%	31%
Lack of growth opportunities	8%	9%
This was never my career path	5%	n/a
Difficulties running a small business	n/a	6%
Lack of respect for my cultural values	0%	3%
Something else (e.g., children's behavioral issues, low compensation, low enrollment)	18%	23%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

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Multiple early educators in focus groups shared similar experiences with stress or anxiety in relation to their role. In focus groups, educators also mentioned stressors related to Parent Aware-related requirements, increased costs, emotional needs/trauma of families, lack of staff, competing priorities, compassion fatigue, paperwork, and increased prevalence of sickness. One educator explained how they encouraged their staff to use their mental health services or connect with their mental health providers if there's a need. A couple of educators explained how it can be difficult for parents to understand the importance of days off for their mental health or even to get errands done such as shopping for the children in their program. One center educator described their role as *"a 24/7 job that you just don't really ever get a break from."* Despite how much they adore their job, another educator even questioned how much longer they would be able to continue, given how tiring managing everything on their plate can be. As one educator explained:

> *"I mean, there's people that have done it years longer than me. Even they're saying all the same things, they can't wait to quit. They can't wait to retire because they just wanna be done. They're too old to be able to do something else, so they're like they just can't wait to be done. That's sad. You shouldn't not wanna do this job."* – Family Child Care Educator Focus Group Participant

Given the impact of these stressors on early educators, we asked educators to reflect on the top three things their programs needed support with in order to be successful. Many of the supports educators need for their programs' success align with the supports they felt would help them better manage stressors. Unsurprisingly, further support around recruiting and retaining qualified staff was a top reported need for program success among center educators (61%; see Table 29), as well as help paying staff a higher wage (76%). Just as family child care educators reported feeling isolated more often than center educators, more family child care educators reported that more opportunities to connect with other early educators were needed for their success (39%) compared to center educators (14%). About half of all early educators (59%), but especially family child care educators, felt that additional funding was needed.

Table 29. Programs' needs for program success (n=432)

Program needs	Center educators (n=191)	Family child care educators (n=241)	Overall (n=432)
Centers only: Help paying staff a higher wage	76%	n/a	76%
Centers only: Help recruiting and retaining qualified staff	61%	n/a	61%
Additional funding	47%	69%	59%
Mental health and wellness supports for me or my staff	20%	20%	20%
More professional development, training, and ongoing learning opportunities	17%	24%	21%
More opportunities to connect with and learn from other ECE providers	14%	39%	28%
Help marketing my program to families	13%	13%	13%
Support with business administration and financial management	5%	23%	15%
Help obtaining and maintaining a Parent Aware Rating	5%	7%	6%
Help obtaining or maintaining an accreditation for my program	3%	4%	4%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Many early educators in focus groups mentioned multiple resources that made it easier for them to continue operating during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Resources included stipends to help educators get their degrees and licenses, as well as the Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program, which provided extra money to teachers for their hard work. Similarly, the Child Care Stabilization Grants helped offset operating costs or other needs. A couple of educators feared what the end of those grants would mean for compensating their staff because they would not be able to cover paying their staff more without the grants.

Parent Aware as a support for families and early educators

We conducted this work as part of an evaluation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's QRIS, which aims to measure and support quality improvements in ECE programs so that families can find a high-quality ECE program. Because of this connection to Parent Aware, alongside the fact that the evaluation coincides with Minnesota DCYF' work on the Parent Aware Redesign, some of our research questions were crafted to better understand how Parent Aware operates within the state's ECE system and how it could better support the needs of children, families, and the ECE workforce. This section includes findings related to the following:

- What quality in ECE settings means to both early educators and families, and to assess the extent to which their views on quality align with how Parent Aware defines quality

- How early educators understand and perceive Parent Aware, including the benefits to being Rated educators and what reasons other educators might have for not being Rated

- What ideas educators have to make Parent Aware more accessible to and supportive of ECE programs across the state

Families' perspectives on quality

In the survey, we asked both educators and families to rate the importance of various factors that could impact program quality—several of which were aligned with Parent Aware's five categories of quality standards for programs, and others that were added to capture elements of quality that may not explicitly be named in Parent Aware's current quality standard categories. Insights from families' responses are outlined below and insights from educators' responses are in the following section.

Families' views on what makes an ECE program high quality are well-aligned with Parent Aware quality standards, though how families articulate those standards varies.

First, we presented families with seven factors related to quality in ECE settings and asked them to rank them in order of importance. In the survey, families were also given a brief description of each factor, which can be found in Appendix A, Table B. As shown in Table 30, "health and safety" and "teaching and relationships with children"—both of which are currently Parent Aware quality standards—were most commonly ranked as the most important factors.[18]

Table 30. Family rankings of most important factors that make a high-quality ECE program (n=318)

Factors that make a quality program	Rank #1 (most important)	Rank #2	Rank #3
Health & Safety*	40%	17%	12%
Teaching & Relationships with Children*	38%	25%	15%
Social Emotional Learning	9%	13%	18%
Relationships with Families*	6%	19%	21%
Professionalism*	3%	8%	9%
Assessments & Planning for Each Individual Child*	2%	10%	14%
Cultural Responsiveness	2%	3%	2%

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: * The five current Parent Aware quality standard categories are highlighted in blue.

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[18] Note that Parent Aware calls its quality standard category "Health and Well-Being," not "health and safety."

We also asked families to, in their own words, describe the top three things that make an ECE program high quality. Our team coded families' responses into themes, including themes that align with Parent Aware's current categories of quality standards. As shown in Table 31, families' descriptions of what makes an ECE program high quality in their own words were more or less aligned with trends in how families ranked quality factors. Again, factors related to "teaching and relationships with children" were the most common response, with three-quarters of families mentioning this as a key feature of quality programs. Other factors that families commonly mentioned included "health and safety" (48%), "relationships with families" (35%), and "professionalism" (16%). Of the Parent Aware quality standard categories, "assessments and planning for each individual child" was rated as the least important and mentioned less frequently across both family rankings and how they described quality in their own words.

Table 31. Themes in families' responses to the top three things that make an ECE program quality (n=299)

Themes in what quality means to families	% of families	Examples and quotes
Teaching & relationships with children	75%	*"Genuine care for children"* *"Respect and care for my child as if they are their own child"* *"Focus on learning and development"* *"Kids enjoying and liking their provider"* *"Joy/happy to be there with your kid"*
Health & safety	48%	*"Clean and sanitary conditions"* *"Safety. I want to feel good knowing I left my child in good hands"*
Relationships with families	35%	*"The communication between teacher and family"* *"Trustworthy"* *"She sends pictures throughout the day to show what the kids are doing"*
Professionalism	16%	*"Educated staff"* *"Well trained staff who are excited to work with children"* *"A background in childhood development"*
Consistency and reliability in closures, hours, staff turnover, etc.	6%	*"Longevity of staff"* *"Consistency of care"* *"Consistent with hours & care provided"*
Social emotional learning	6%	*"Compassionate, social-emotional growth opportunities"* *"Emotional regulation"* *"Teach them emotional maturity"*
Cost	6%	*"Competitive pricing"*

Themes in what quality means to families	% of families	Examples and quotes
Assessments & planning for each individual child	4%	*"Getting to know and understand a child's individual needs"* *"Individual attention"* *"Recognizing individualism in my child"*
Flexibility	4%	*"Flexible with children"* *"Flexibility"*
Cultural responsiveness	3%	*"Respectful of culture and religion"* *"The ability to educate without bias"*
Hours/schedule	3%	*"Good flexible schedule"* *"Accommodating full time year round work schedules"*
Other	18%	

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)
Note: Each family could report up to three things that make a program high quality, so percentages may not total to 100.
Cells shaded in blue are themes aligned with Parent Aware current five categories of quality standards.

Most families (73%) said that their views on what made a high-quality ECE program had not changed since the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the 26 percent of families who said their views on quality had changed, families most commonly mentioned that health and safety practices had become a greater priority for them since the pandemic:

> *"Yes, seeing how different daycares reacted to COVID and the precautions that they take to prevent any illnesses made me change my views. I have seen some daycares stick to protocol when it comes to illnesses and others who just let things slide. As a parent to a little baby it is nice to see places still sticking to protocol and not letting these sicknesses continue to spread."* – Family Survey Respondent

While families noted that cultural responsiveness was important, most shared that learning to respect other cultures was what they would like for their children to learn.

In focus groups, most families did not have specific cultural practices they felt were important for early educators to incorporate in the program. Families felt it was important for their children to learn to be respectful and kind in general, and specifically respectful of customs and cultures different than their own. Families also felt it was important for children to have awareness of other cultures that may be different from their own. Several shared that this was valuable for their children to learn and see. As such, they enjoyed when educators incorporated events that teach their children about diversity. One parent described the importance of their child learning to respect other cultures:

> *"I want them to be safe and happy and respectful. I want to know that they're respectful of other cultures. If there's things that's important to other kids in the class, umm, just kindness and respect, other than that I don't feel like we're missing anything or there's anything that we need."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Another parent elaborated on why it is important for children to be exposed to other cultures:

> *"I do feel it would be beneficial if daycare and schools in general help to at least showcase other cultures or get them accustomed to other cultures…maybe at least so that they get exposed to it and*

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> *understand…this is just a different way of looking at things and then they can get accustomed to it where they're not going to probably get exposed to that in their home environment."* – Family Focus Group Participant

Importantly, more than 80 percent of the families who participated in focus groups identified as White and spoke English. It may be that families from different racial, cultural, or linguistic backgrounds place different levels of importance on cultural responsiveness in their children's ECE experiences.

Early educator perspectives on quality

Like families, early educators ranked "health and safety" and "teaching and relationships with children" as the most important practices related to quality in ECE settings.

Similar to the questions we posed to families about what quality means to them, we asked educators who responded to the survey to both rank the importance of various practices that could impact ECE quality and to describe what quality means to them in their own words. Importantly, educators have a great deal of knowledge about and personal experience with best practices in ECE settings, and educators from Parent Aware Rated programs are also likely familiar with Parent Aware quality standards.[19] Because many educators have this additional context about quality in ECE settings, rather than presenting them with the same list of seven categories that families ranked in order of importance, we instead asked them to rank the importance of more a detailed list of 17 practices that could impact children's experiences in care and the program's quality.

Table 32 shows early educators' ratings about the importance of various practices that could impact program quality, as the *average* rating for practices within each category. For example, within the "teaching and relationships with children" category, on average, 81 percent of all educators ranked the four practices within this category as "very important." Across program types, educators on average ranked "health and safety" most highly, with nearly all educators (97%) reporting they see those two practices as very important. Educators' perceptions of importance were generally aligned with Parent Aware's current five categories of quality standards, though there were some differences in what family child care educators perceived as important compared to center educators. For several categories—including "professionalism" and "teaching and relationships with children," for example, more center than family child care educators felt those practices were very important. Like families, educators also ranked practices related to "assessments and planning for each individual child" as less important, again with some notable differences by program type: Just over half of family child care educators (59%) felt these practices were very important compared to 80 percent of center educators.

Table 32. Early educator perceptions of the importance of factors that make a quality ECE program (n=433)

Factors impacting quality	Very important			Somewhat important		
	Center educators	Family child care educators	Overall	Center educators	Family child care educators	Overall
Health & safety *(2 questions)* *	97%	97%	97%	3%	2%	2%
Professionalism *(2 questions)* *	91%	83%	86%	8%	14%	11%
Relationships with families *(2 questions)* *	88%	84%	86%	11%	12%	12%
Teaching & relationships with children *(4 questions)* *	89%	75%	81%	11%	19%	15%

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[19] For the five categories aligned with Parent Aware's current categories of quality standards, the items educators rated the importance of within each category are aligned with Parent Aware quality standards. You can read more about Parent Aware's quality standards here: https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfserver/Public/DHS-6346B-ENG

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Factors impacting quality	Very important			Somewhat important		
	Center educators	Family child care educators	Overall	Center educators	Family child care educators	Overall
Equity, cultural responsiveness, social-emotional skills, & other factors *(5 questions)*	79%	72%	74%	20%	23%	23%
Assessments & planning for each individual child *(2 questions) ***	80%	59%	69%	19%	37%	29%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: * The five current Parent Aware quality standard categories are highlighted in blue. Educators rated the importance of items and the research team aligned them to Parent Aware quality standards. Twelve of the seventeen items aligned with a Parent Aware quality standard category.

As with families, we also asked early educators to describe in their own words the top three things that make an ECE program high quality. Our team coded their responses into themes, including those that align with Parent Aware's current categories of quality standards (see Table 33). Educators' descriptions of a high-quality ECE program were generally aligned with Parent Aware's current categories of program quality standards, though "assessments and planning for each individual child" was again mentioned by fewer respondents compared to the other Parent Aware categories.

Table 33. Themes in early educators' responses to the top three things that make an ECE program high quality (n=419)

Themes in what quality means to providers	% of providers	Examples and quotes
Teaching & relationships with children	82%	*"Positive, warm caring environment with teachers who smile and LOVE children"* *"Curriculum-having a good research based curriculum is important to teach children the skills they need to learn to be successful"* *"Acknowledging the importance of play"*
Relationships with families	48%	*"Having open communication with families and being able to allow them to feel comfortable sending their students to school"* *"Having a relationship with the entire family. Treating the kiddos like they are family because I share the responsibility of raising the kids. Sharing in the families values and what is important to them"*
Health & safety	43%	*"Providing nutritious meals"* *"Safe and fun environment"*
Professionalism	31%	*"Highly qualified teachers and staff who are paid competitively, supported by administration and provided ongoing professional development"* *"Staff who are educated or seeking education"* *"Management supporting and listening to teachers"* *"Low teacher turnover rates"*
Equity, Cultural Responsiveness, Social-Emotional Skills, & Other Factors	21%	*"Learning materials and teaching styles that are age-appropriate and respectful of children's cultural and ethnic heritage"* *"Allowing kids to free play and sensory play to use their imagination and allow expression of emotions and developmental health"*
Assessments & Planning for Each Individual Child	11%	*"Reflecting on children's growth over time using appropriate assessments and screenings"* *"Attentiveness to the needs of the children and planning activities to challenge them and support them in their academic endeavors"*
Outdoor time/play	5%	*"I have a big yard, lots of room to run and playing"*
Parent and/or provider costs	4%	*"Being able to afford to pay others and yourself"* *"The funds to have the equipment and tools to do the teachings"*
Small group size or low teacher-child ratio	3%	*"Settings that are safe and provide small group sizes and adult-to-child ratios encouraging the best opportunities for development"*
Flexibility (e.g., with needs, hours)	2%	*"Able to have flexibility around everyone's needs"*

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Themes in what quality means to providers	% of providers	Examples and quotes
		"Flexible hourly extended care before and after the tuition-based classrooms"
Consistent, reliable, and/or dependable care	2%	*"Consistent, reliable childcare. Meaning being open to provide care"* *"Communication and trustworthy"*
Parent Aware	1%	*"Parent Aware rating"*
Other	4%	Examples include peer-peer interactions and transportation

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Each educator could report up to three things that make a program high quality, so percentages may not total to 100. Cells shaded in blue are themes aligned with Parent Aware current five categories of quality standards.

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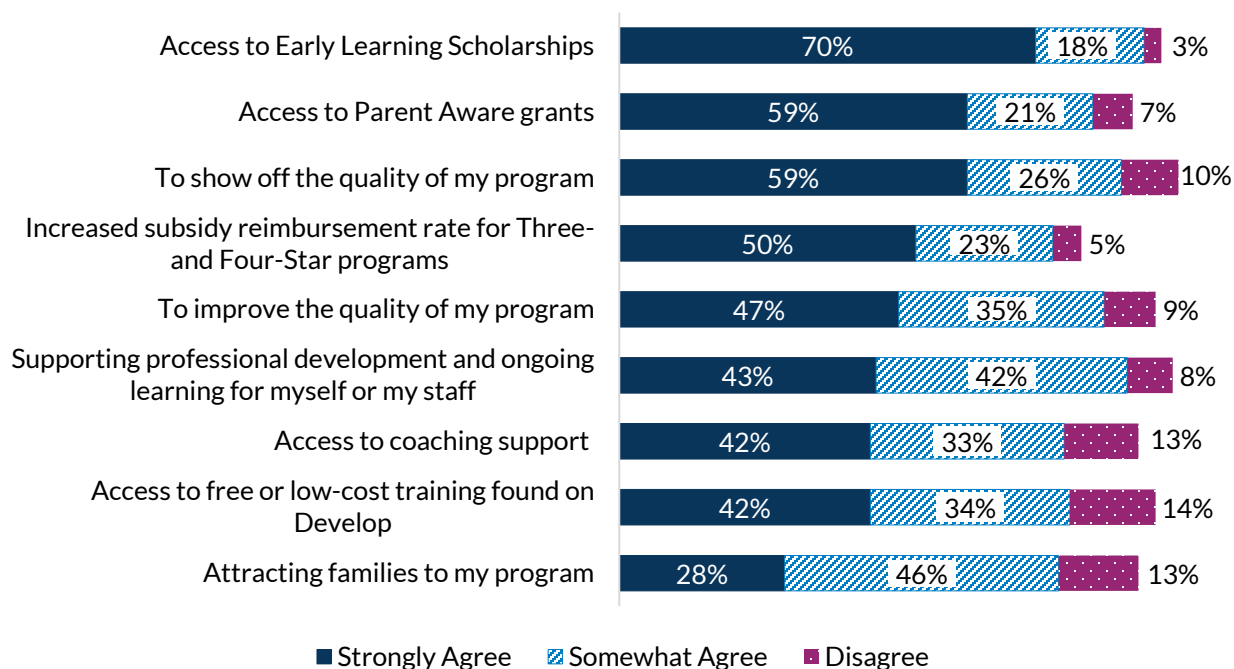Insights from Surveys and Focus Groups

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Rated early educators' experiences and perceptions of Parent Aware

We asked the 214 early educators from Rated programs who responded to the survey about their perceptions of and experiences with Parent Aware, including what they see as the main benefits to being Rated. Key findings are discussed below. Notably, we only asked educators who worked in licensed child care centers and family child care programs to answer questions about Parent Aware. Because Head Start and school-based Pre-K programs are typically rated at the district or grantee level through an accelerated Rating process, those respondents would likely not have enough context about Parent Aware to answer these questions meaningfully.

Most center and family child care educators agree that that their program has benefited in some way from being Parent Aware Rated.

Figures 15 and 16 show center and family child care educators' levels of agreement that their programs have seen various benefits since becoming Parent Aware Rated. Educators generally agreed that their programs have experienced various benefits since being Parent Aware Rated. Across program types and for all possible benefits except one ("attracting families to my program"), 70 percent of educators or more either strongly or somewhat agreed that their program had experienced each benefit.

**Figure 15.** Rated center educators' reports of main benefits of being Rated (n=104)

Benefit	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Disagree
Access to Early Learning Scholarships	70%	18%	3%
Access to Parent Aware grants	59%	21%	7%
To show off the quality of my program	59%	26%	10%
Increased subsidy reimbursement rate for Three- and Four-Star programs	50%	23%	5%
To improve the quality of my program	47%	35%	9%
Supporting professional development and ongoing learning for myself or my staff	43%	42%	8%
Access to coaching support	42%	33%	13%
Access to free or low-cost training found on Develop	42%	34%	14%
Attracting families to my program	28%	46%	13%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because some educators said they were "not sure" if their program had seen this benefit since becoming Rated.

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Center and family child care educators have different experiences of the financial benefits of being Rated, such as access to grants or financial assistance for families.

Parent Aware Rated programs gain access to various financial supports, including quality improvement grants, the ability to accept Early Learning Scholarships,[20] and higher child care subsidy reimbursement rates (for Three- and Four-Star Rated programs only).[21] Although both center and family child care educators agreed they had seen these benefits, there was some variation in their level of agreement for each benefit across program types. For example, the majority of center educators strongly agreed they had benefited from access to Early Learning Scholarships (70%), but less than half of family child care educators strongly agreed (46%). In contrast, more family child care educators strongly agreed they had benefited from access to Parent Aware grants (79%) compared to center educators (59%). Across program types, only around half of educators strongly agreed that they had benefited from the increased subsidy reimbursement rates available to Three- and Four-Star Rated programs (50% of center educators and 44% of family child care educators).

Figure 16. Rated family child care educators' reports of main benefits of being Rated (n=110)
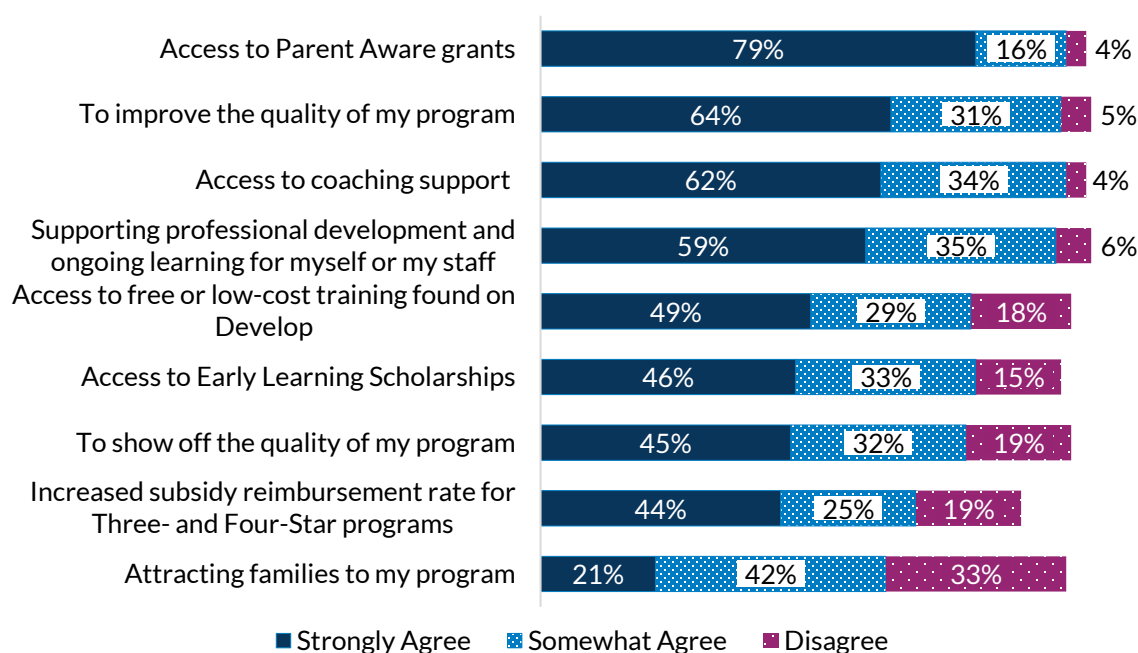
Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 because some educators said they were "not sure" if their program had seen this benefit since becoming Rated.

Some early educators have not seen certain benefits of being Rated, such as attracting families to their programs, and family child care educators report seeing fewer benefits overall than centers.

Across program types, educators most commonly disagreed that being Rated has helped attract families to their program. Around one in three family child care educators (33%) and one in ten center educators (13%)

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said they had not seen this benefit. Similarly, around 15 percent of educators across program types disagreed that they had benefited from access to free or low-cost trainings found in Develop[22] or from showing off the quality of their program. Family child care educators generally reported seeing fewer benefits of being Rated compared to center educators. For all possible benefits except one ("to improve the quality of my program"), a higher percentage of family child care educators than center educators somewhat or strongly disagreed that they had seen each benefit.

In the survey, we asked early educators who said they had not seen certain benefits of being Rated to explain their answer and also share any ideas for how Parent Aware could make sure that programs see more tangible benefits of being Rated in the future. Of the 49 educators who answered that question, almost half (n=21) mentioned that most families either do not know or do not care about Parent Aware Ratings— particularly since many families struggle to finding a program that meets the most baseline criteria such as having open slots or being within a reasonable distance of their home or work. For example:

> *"None of the families I am currently serving knew about Parent Aware when they enrolled. They are grateful for the benefits we've received since I became rated, however I do not think it attracted families to my program."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent
>
> *"As long as [there is] a childcare shortage, people will choose a center with openings regardless of Rating."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Regarding how Parent Aware could make the benefits of being Rated more tangible, educators suggested strategies such as offering more or different trainings (n=6), communicating with programs about Parent Aware and its benefits more often and specifically between re-Rating cycles (n=5), and expanding scholarships or other financial supports for families and programs (n=7). For example, one educator shared:

> *"If I have to provide examples of curriculum for my infants, they should be allowed to apply for scholarships. I have handed out many scholarship applications and none of my families have ever qualified. When I started in Parent Aware, the required trainings were always free and offered in my city. This is no longer the case. The only time I've had contact with a coach is when I re-Rate, otherwise no one ever checks to see if we need any support. I've also never had a phone call [from a family] stating they got my name from Families First or that they even know I'm Parent Aware Rated."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Most early educators have mostly positive perceptions of Parent Aware.
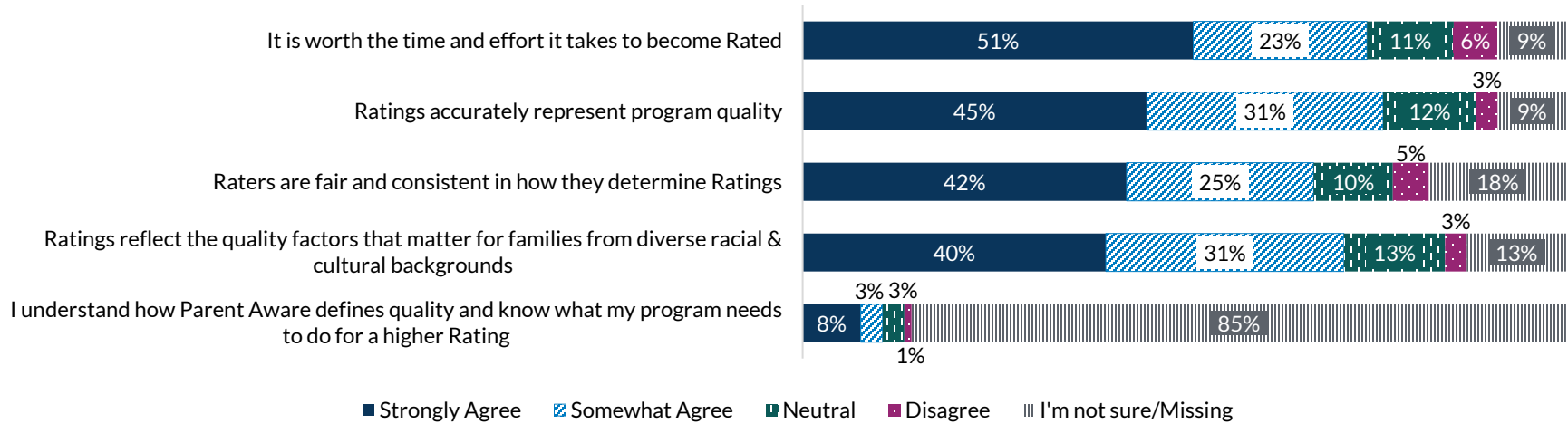
Figures 17 and 18 show Rated center educators' and Rated family child care educators' levels of agreement with various statements about Parent Aware.

More than 70 percent of Rated center educators strongly or somewhat agreed that it was worth the time and effort to become Rated, and that Ratings accurately represent program quality. Few center educators disagreed with any of the statements about Parent Aware, though many did not respond to the item "I understand how Parent Aware defines quality and know what my program needs to do for a higher Rating."

Rated family child care educators similarly held mostly positive opinions of Parent Aware, but the statements that received the highest endorsement from family child care educators differed slightly from those most endorsed by centers. Family child care educators' level of agreement was strongest for Raters being fair and consistent in how they determine Ratings, with almost 80 percent strongly or somewhat agreeing. Like centers, most family child care educators also strongly or somewhat agreed that it was worth the time and effort to become Rated.
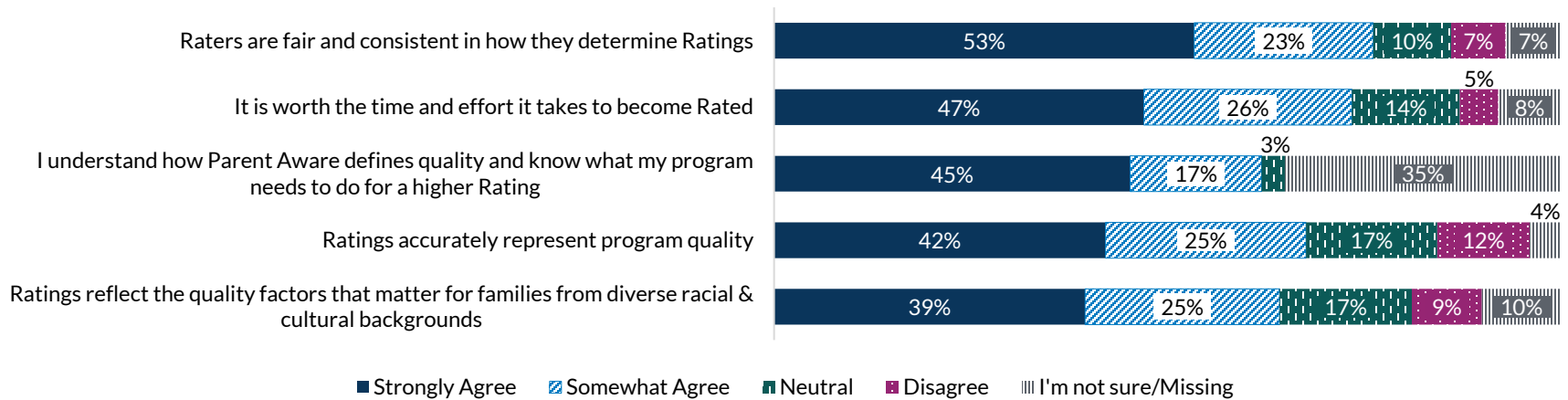
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[22] Develop is Minnesota's Quality Improvement and Registry tool for early education and school-age care professionals. Using this online tool, providers can search trainings; track licensing training requirements and achievements; verify employment, education, and training; and use tools related to professional development and licensing requirements. See https://www.developtoolmn.org/.

Figure 17. Rated center educators' perceptions of Parent Aware (n=104)

It is worth the time and effort it takes to become Rated: Strongly Agree 51%, Somewhat Agree 23%, Neutral 11%, Disagree 6%, I'm not sure/Missing 9%

Ratings accurately represent program quality: Strongly Agree 45%, Somewhat Agree 31%, Neutral 12%, Disagree 3%, I'm not sure/Missing 9%

Raters are fair and consistent in how they determine Ratings: Strongly Agree 42%, Somewhat Agree 25%, Neutral 10%, Disagree 5%, I'm not sure/Missing 18%

Ratings reflect the quality factors that matter for families from diverse racial & cultural backgrounds: Strongly Agree 40%, Somewhat Agree 31%, Neutral 13%, Disagree 3%, I'm not sure/Missing 13%

I understand how Parent Aware defines quality and know what my program needs to do for a higher Rating: Strongly Agree 8%, Somewhat Agree 3%, Neutral 3%, Disagree 1%, I'm not sure/Missing 85%

Legend: ■ Strongly Agree ▨ Somewhat Agree ▥ Neutral ■ Disagree ▤ I'm not sure/Missing

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Figure 18. Rated family child care educators' perceptions of Parent Aware (n=110)

Raters are fair and consistent in how they determine Ratings: Strongly Agree 53%, Somewhat Agree 23%, Neutral 10%, Disagree 7%, I'm not sure/Missing 7%

It is worth the time and effort it takes to become Rated: Strongly Agree 47%, Somewhat Agree 26%, Neutral 14%, Disagree 5%, I'm not sure/Missing 8%

I understand how Parent Aware defines quality and know what my program needs to do for a higher Rating: Strongly Agree 45%, Somewhat Agree 17%, Neutral 3%, I'm not sure/Missing 35%

Ratings accurately represent program quality: Strongly Agree 42%, Somewhat Agree 25%, Neutral 17%, Disagree 12%, I'm not sure/Missing 4%

Ratings reflect the quality factors that matter for families from diverse racial & cultural backgrounds: Strongly Agree 39%, Somewhat Agree 25%, Neutral 17%, Disagree 9%, I'm not sure/Missing 10%

Legend: ■ Strongly Agree ▨ Somewhat Agree ▥ Neutral ■ Disagree ▤ I'm not sure/Missing

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

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Unrated early educators' perceptions of Parent Aware

We asked the 225 early educators from unrated programs who responded to the survey about their knowledge and perceptions of Parent Aware, including whether they have considered participating and what factors influenced their decision. Key findings are discussed below.

More than half of unrated early educators who responded to the survey say they have considered participating in Parent Aware.

As shown in Figure 19, unrated educators who responded to the survey had varying degrees of familiarity and personal experience with Parent Aware. More than half of unrated educators said they have considered participating in Parent Aware, whereas around one in four said they had not considered participating. A small number of educators said they used to participate but no longer do (18% of center educators and 7% of family child care educators), and very few said they had never heard of Parent Aware before (6% of center educators and 1% of family child care educators).

Figure 19. Unrated educators' experiences with Parent Aware participation (n=285)
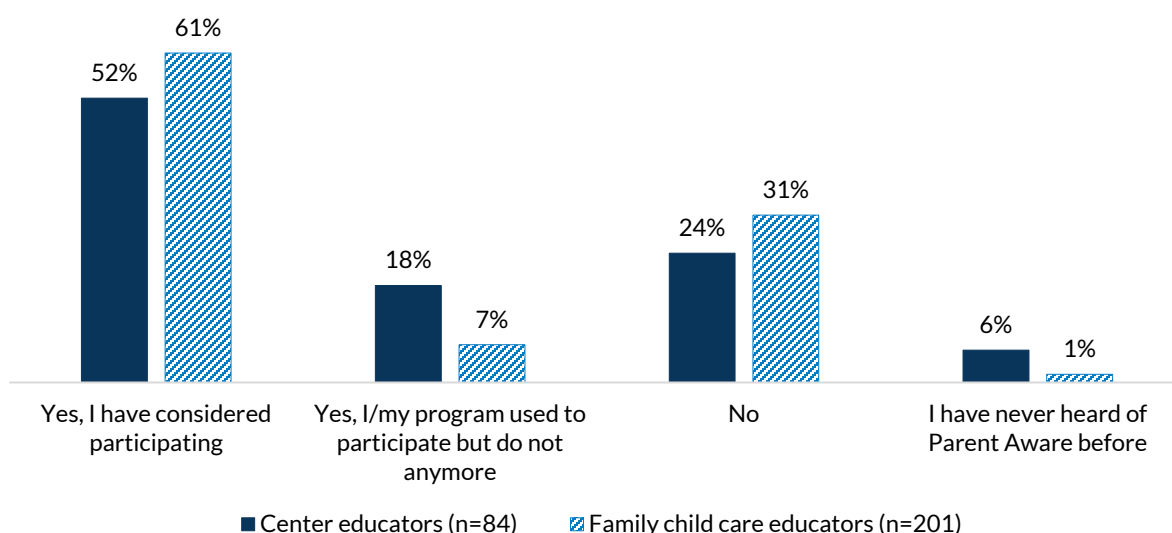
Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Some early educators' decisions not to become Parent Aware Rated are influenced by concerns about whether Ratings are an accurate representation of quality or skepticism as to whether their program would benefit from being Rated.

In the survey, we also asked unrated educators to explain their reasons for not pursuing a Parent Aware Rating in a closed-ended question along with an option to give narrative responses. Respondents could select multiple options that were applicable for them in the table below. As shown in Table 34, unrated educators' most common reason for not participating was that they don't believe a Rating would accurately reflect their program's quality (33%). Educators also commonly gave reasons related to not feeling like their program would benefit from becoming Rated. For example, some unrated educators said they don't want to participate because they think their program is already high quality (28%), don't think families care about ratings (24%), or don't need it to attract more families to their program (22%). Around one in five unrated educators gave a reason related to the difficulty of the Rating process itself, including, for example, that their staff don't have the capacity to meet training and other Rating requirements (centers only; 22%) or that it is too difficult to become Rated (all program types; 16%). Compared to center educators, a higher proportion

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of family child care educators said they did not believe that a Rating would accurately represent their quality (39%, compared to 24% of centers) and that they don't think families care about Ratings (32%, compared to 13% of centers).

Table 34. Unrated early educators' reasons for not participating in Parent Aware (n=225)

Reasons for not participating	Center educators (n=86)	Family child care educators (n=139)	Overall (n=225)
I don't believe Ratings accurately represent quality	24%	39%	33%
My program is already high quality	38%	22%	28%
I don't think families care about Ratings	13%	32%	24%
My program is at maximum enrollment, so I don't need to attract more families	19%	24%	22%
I don't see an incentive or benefit to participating	16%	23%	20%
It's too difficult to become Rated	20%	14%	16%
I don't need access to Early Learning Scholarships or higher subsidy reimbursement rates	15%	15%	15%
I don't need Parent Aware grants	12%	10%	11%
I/my staff don't need additional coaching or support with professional development	8%	12%	11%
For centers: My staff don't have the time or capacity to meet the training and other Rating requirements	22%	n/a	n/a
Challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic	12%	4%	7%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)
Note: Respondents could select multiple options, so percentages may not total to 100.

Some educators from unrated programs also shared more information about their reasons for not participating in Parent Aware in an open-ended question. Of the 43 educators who answered the question, the most common responses were that Parent Aware does not feel helpful or "worth it" to their program (n=11), that the Rating process is too burdensome and time intensive (n=11), that their program is already high quality (n=9), or that something about their personal values or practices does not align with Parent Aware (n=7). For example, two educators shared:

> *"I have participated in Parent Aware at a center that I was director in, and I feel the amount of work (paperwork) just to show that you are "high quality" was more effort than the benefits I received. I also feel that [the] curriculum that I had been utilizing was high quality and did not feel the need to have to pay for a Parent Aware Rated Curriculum which would have more costs associated with it."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent
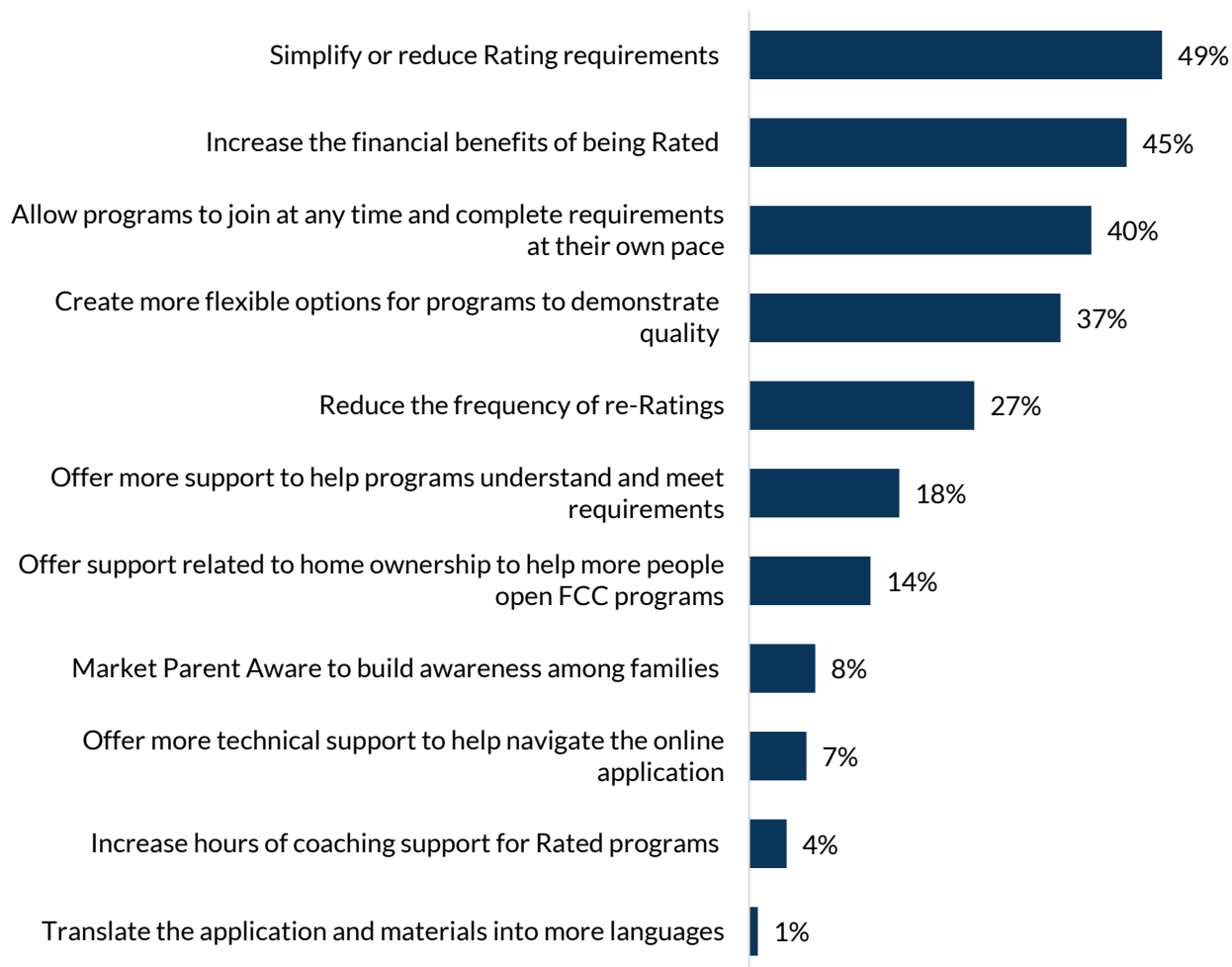
> *"My number 1 reason to not participate is I don't believe Star Rating has anything to do with the quality of daycare I have. I've done daycare for over 30 years and I serve great families with no turnover and a wait list. Word of mouth is the best way to promote my daycare."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Early educators think the best ways to make Parent Aware more accessible are simplifying requirements, increasing the financial benefits of being Rated, and making the Rating process more flexible.

In the survey, we asked all early educators (Rated and unrated) for ideas on how to make Parent Aware more accessible so more programs would join and become Rated. As shown in Figure 20, educators' top three suggestions were to simplify or reduce Rating requirements, increase financial benefits, and allow programs to join at their own time and complete the process at their own pace, with nearly half of all educators endorsing those options. Other popular ideas included creating more flexible options for programs to

demonstrate their quality (37%); reducing the frequency of re-Ratings, which are currently every two years (27%); and offering more support to help programs understand and meet requirements (18%).

Figure 20. Top 3 strategies for making Parent Aware more accessible so more programs join (n=190)

Strategy	Percentage
Simplify or reduce Rating requirements	49%
Increase the financial benefits of being Rated	45%
Allow programs to join at any time and complete requirements at their own pace	40%
Create more flexible options for programs to demonstrate quality	37%
Reduce the frequency of re-Ratings	27%
Offer more support to help programs understand and meet requirements	18%
Offer support related to home ownership to help more people open FCC programs	14%
Market Parent Aware to build awareness among families	8%
Offer more technical support to help navigate the online application	7%
Increase hours of coaching support for Rated programs	4%
Translate the application and materials into more languages	1%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

Educators' ideas to make Parent Aware more accessible

Early educators experience a lot of pressure managing Parent Aware processes.

In an open-ended survey question, some early educators also shared other ideas for making Parent Aware more accessible. Of the 118 Rated and unrated early educators who responded to this question, nearly half had suggestions related to streamlining or simplifying the Rating process to reduce burden on educators—particularly in light of industry-wide staffing shortages. For example, educators shared:

> *"I had looked into [Parent Aware] a few years prior to COVID. The biggest thing for us not participating was the amount of paperwork to be a part of it, and also we do have a high quality program and we are not sure that being Rated necessarily means that the program is high quality. We have a staff shortage and are burning the candle at both ends, and to add things to it could just be the thing that would make staff leave." – Early Educator Survey Respondent*

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> *"I think there is a lot of paperwork that doesn't really prove the quality. The best way is to interview/observe staff and see that the goals are being met and work on quality together. I think centers think a coach just comes in to observe and tell them what's wrong, and that's absolutely not it."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Other educators shared specific suggestions related to training requirements as well as the coaching and other support offered to Rated programs (n=28). These responses often spoke to the desire for educators to have more ongoing and personalized support throughout the Rating process, and for more flexibility regarding how programs can demonstrate their quality. For example:

> *"Market Parent Aware to build awareness among providers. Have Parent Aware help new providers become licensed [and be] mentors from the beginning."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

> *"More support for cultural and language barriers to becoming Rated by hiring staff that speak the language. Allow family child care providers to choose observations. And the quality pieces not observed the provider can document—less paperwork and still lower stress if the kids or teacher is having an off day. A mentor or cohort type group to support through Rating, allowing the coaches' time to go further."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

> *"Reduce the reliance on Develop. I strongly agree that regular and ongoing PD [professional development] is important for staff AND I believe staff should be able to pursue PD that meets their own goals. There are many quality trainings available nationally and internationally, especially now that many are offered online. The trainings offered through Develop are often incredibly boring, very poorly taught, and feel like busy work/checking a box. My staff members' time and energy is my number one resource. I cannot and will not squander it on poorly done trainings. I want my staff energized to seek PD to help them grow as professionals and meet the unique needs of [their] children. I think it is ridiculous that only trainers/trainings approved by Develop count for Parent Aware hours and that trainings that count for MDE for re-licensure are not counted for Develop."* – Early Educator Survey Respondent

Early educators' challenges related to navigating the Rating process were also echoed in feedback educators shared during focus groups. In the focus groups, educators mentioned finding it hard to keep staff with the additional training and education required by Parent Aware. A couple of educators mentioned that the requirements of Parent Aware are much higher and more stringent than in other states and some educators even named Parent Aware as one of the reasons for educators leaving the field or burning out. One educator went on to say that the inconsistency in licensing was difficult to navigate; for example, this educator explained that, even though some programs have the sample licensing problem, one program may receive a correction order and the other will not, based on the licensor. Overall, many educators wished to see Parent Aware regulations streamlined. As one educator said:

> *"You don't have child care, those people can't get to work. And some of those people can't get to work because they don't have child care. The system is broken right now and I'm hoping in some way something can get fixed. But a big part of it - I firmly believe after all these years I've done child care, the regulations have to change. They have got to loosen up some things, or we're gonna have nobody."* – Family Child Care Educator Focus Group Participant

Limitations

Although these findings offer valuable insights into how families with young children and early educators experience the ECE system in Minnesota, there are some notable limitations to this study, as discussed below.

Our team aimed to recruit a diverse sample that would represent a wide range of perspectives and experiences with Minnesota's ECE system and also allow us to explore whether families' experiences with ECE vary by their demographic characteristics (e.g., geography, income, racial/ethnic background). However, we experienced some challenges with recruiting certain populations of families which impacted not only the generalizability of our findings, but also our ability to make statistical comparisons between subgroups of families. Our survey and focus group response rates for families were lower than our sampling targets—particularly for those living in rural or micropolitan areas of the state, those with incomes below 175 percent of the federal poverty level, and those who identified as Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, or American Indian or Alaska Native (see Table 1). Because of this, our final sample size was not necessarily representative of the overall population in Minnesota, nor was it large enough to allow some subgroup comparisons. To bolster response rates among families, we extended our data collection timeline by several months. We also expanded our recruitment strategies partway through data collection. We reached out to ECE programs and other organizations that work with families in rural and micropolitan areas of Minnesota and asked them to share the survey link with eligible families in their networks. This improved our response rates, but because we were limited in the length of time for which we could continue to keep the survey open, our response rates were still lower than our targets. Because of this, our findings may not represent the experiences and perspectives of all families in the state, and particularly those living in rural or micropolitan areas, those who identify as a race/ethnicity other than White, or those with incomes below 175 percent of the federal poverty level.

Another limitation of this study was our approach to recruiting families and early educators to participate in focus groups. Rather than open recruitment to all eligible families and educators in Minnesota who were interested in participating in a focus group, we instead decided to first focus our recruitment efforts on families and educators who completed the survey.[23] If this effort was unsuccessful, we were prepared to open recruitment beyond those populations, but we did not need to do so. As a result, the focus group sample for both families and educators overlaps with the respective samples of survey respondents. Instead of using the focus groups to gather perspectives from a larger group of families and educators, we used them as an opportunity to have the families and educators who responded to the survey react to preliminary survey findings, add context to their responses, and dive deeper into the nuances of their experiences.

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[23] At the end of the family and early educator surveys, we asked all respondents if they were interested in participating in a follow-up focus group.

Key Findings and Considerations

Key findings

Below, we synthesize the key findings from our surveys and focus groups with families and early educators. Findings are organized into four broad categories, including 1) families' and early educators' experiences navigating the ECE system, 2) family-educator relationships and children's development, 3) what the ECE sector and workforce need to thrive, and 4) Parent Aware as a support for families and early educators. Key considerations for DCYF as they continue their efforts on the Parent Aware Redesign are also discussed.

Families' and early educators' experiences with the ECE system

Although some aspects of the ECE sector have stabilized since the COVID-19 pandemic, challenges—including staffing shortages and the high cost of ECE—still remain. Both families and early educators reported that some of the challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic have improved over time. In 2023, educators reported fewer program closures, and many families reported that their children are having more positive experiences with their ECE program, including opportunities to socialize with other children their age, stability in their daily routines, and excitement about going to ECE. However, both families and educators also reported some challenges have persisted or even became worse since the pandemic. More than half of programs said they had higher operational costs and more trouble finding staff in 2023[24] compared to the peak of the pandemic. While around half of families felt that the ECE system had stabilized or mostly "returned to normal" in 2023, the other half felt the stability of the system had not changed since the pandemic. A few even felt the system was less stable in 2023, noting that many programs had more stringent policies regarding illness and sending children home when they are sick, which can create disruptions to families' routines. Additionally, one out of every four families said that it had been more difficult to find a high-quality ECE program within their budget since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Certain families, including those in rural areas and those looking for a specific type of care (e.g., infant/toddler care), face additional challenges accessing care. When looking for ECE for their young children, families prioritized a variety of factors, including location, positive reviews, and flexible scheduling options. However, many families shared that these preferences felt almost trivial and that they were not able to prioritize them in their search for ECE because the available options were so limited. Some families found it challenging to find a particular type of ECE program that could meet their specific needs, such as programs that offer infant or toddler care, can enroll multiple children (e.g., siblings), or can care for children with disabilities. Additionally, many families who needed care at certain times or on a certain schedule (e.g., year-round, weekend, or overnight care; flexible scheduling from week to week) said their current ECE program was not able to accommodate those needs. Families' access was also heavily impacted by where in the state they lived. One out of every three families across the state and nearly half of families in rural and micropolitan areas reported difficulties finding a program that met their specific needs and had openings. Many families described having to make difficult decisions about what to prioritize when choosing an ECE program for their child, and some felt that they did not have much of a choice at all because of how limited their options were.

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[24] Staffing challenges were specific to center-based ECE programs.

Family-educator relationships and supporting children's development

Early educators are a crucial source of support for families—not only to promote their children's healthy learning and development in ECE, but also to help families meet a variety of other needs. Most families reported that they frequently communicate with their early educator about a variety of topics, including children's experiences at the program, behavior, learning, and health. Further, most families said they felt very comfortable talking to their educators about any concerns regarding their children's learning or development as well as other needs their family might have. Although help paying for ECE was one of families' primary areas of reported need, many also mentioned needing support in other areas outside of ECE, such as early intervention services, food and nutrition assistance, mental health care, or transportation. Sometimes, families brought these needs to educators at their ECE programs. Around one in five families said their educator had shared information or a referral to help them access needed services, and families with lower incomes were more likely to have received a referral from their ECE program than those with higher incomes. Most families said they feel confident in their program's ability to connect them with needed information and supports, and the majority of families who had received information or a referral from their program were satisfied with the support they received. Some educators noted, however, that cost and availability of services were typically the main challenges to families getting outside help even after a referral was made. Educators who shared information or referrals with families often relied on local organizations and online resources (e.g., Help Me Connect, ParentAware.org) for help.

Families appreciated it when their children's early educators took time to build a trusting relationship with them and noted that these relationships were crucial to creating an environment where they felt comfortable discussing any concerns or needs. Some families shared examples of creative ways that programs have engaged them in their children's learning and built these strong relationships, including through virtual communications (e.g., e-newsletters or phone check-ins) and in-person events (e.g., family picnics, holiday celebrations, and gatherings for new families to meet each other). Families placed immense value on educators' knowledge of local services and willingness to share information or make referrals to help them meet their needs. However, many families also noted that they know educators are overworked and underpaid, and therefore viewed this kind of help as an added bonus and not something they expected from their ECE program by default.

Most educators and families report that children are showing age-appropriate progress in most areas of development, though some educators want more support to promote children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills in collaboration with families. Despite the many challenges that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of both families and early educators who responded to the surveys rated children as "on track" in most domains of their learning and development. However, educators, and especially center educators, had some concerns about children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills. Educators attributed their concerns to various factors, though many saw them as related to the pandemic and the valuable socialization and learning opportunities that many children lost during that time. Other educators noticed an increase in children's reliance on technology, which they felt could also have been impacting their social skills and ability to regulate their own behaviors and emotions. Importantly, educators not only had concerns about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills, but also reported feeling less confident in their own ability to support children's development in those areas. Sometimes, this lack of confidence may be influenced by a disconnect between educators' concerns and how families see children's development (e.g., if an educator has concerns about a child's development that are not shared by the child's family). Educators felt better able to support children's learning and address any concerns when families are involved and willing to collaborate toward solutions.

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Needs of the ECE sector and workforce

Early educators say the main supports they need to be successful are financial assistance and help with staffing. Across both the survey and focus groups with early educators, their message was clear: The ECE sector is facing a crisis, and programs need support to continue operating and providing high-quality care that supports families' needs. When asked about the kinds of support their programs need to be successful, educators most often said they needed help increasing wages and benefits for staff (including time off) and more general financial assistance (e.g., grants) for programs. Relatedly, center educators reported that staffing was another significant challenge, including difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Many center educators described a "revolving door" of staff, noting that the long hours and demanding nature of the job combined with its low compensation and benefits may be driving prospective candidates out of the field. In line with these comments, we found that 15 percent of the educators who responded to our survey said they were likely to leave the ECE field in the next year, most often noting low compensation and benefits, a lack of respect for the profession, and burdensome regulations as the main reasons they might leave. This widespread staff turnover impacts children's experiences in care and also creates tremendous administrative burden for program leadership. For example, new staff not only need to become familiar with the day-to-day operations of the program, but may also need to complete training or coursework for the program to stay in compliance with licensing and other requirements (e.g., required training for a Parent Aware Rating). Center educators shared some creative strategies they have leveraged to help recruit and retain staff, including creating emergency funds that staff can draw from in case of a significant life event, adding more holidays for staff to get time away from work, keeping teacher-child ratios low, and ensuring all staff have daily prep time. However, many center educators also noted a tension between their desire to compensate their staff fairly and the need to keep the cost of care affordable for families. Because educators have a limited ability to increase staff wages without also increasing tuition costs for families, many felt that a significant and sustained outside investment would be needed to fully address low wages and staffing challenges across the ECE workforce.

Some of the stressors impacting family child care educators are different from those impacting center educators, and so are the supports needed to address them. Although the majority of early educators echoed the need for financial assistance for ECE programs and help to increase educators' wages and benefits, some of the other reported challenges and needed supports varied by the type of ECE program. As discussed above, most center educators felt that staffing was the primary area in which they needed additional support. Center educators were also more likely than family child care educators to have concerns about preschool-aged children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills and to want additional support in those areas. In contrast to center educators, who work as part of a team of staff at a center, family child care educators care for children in their own home and are often a staff of one person, meaning they are responsible for not only caring for children, but also preparing meals, communicating with families, managing the operational and financial side of their business, and staying in compliance with licensing and other regulatory requirements. This nuance in how educators in different settings experience the ECE system was reflected in our findings. Family child care educators more often mentioned a need for more opportunities to connect with and learn from other ECE professionals, support with business operations and financial management, and more professional development and ongoing learning opportunities. Compared to center educators, more family child care educators also mentioned help making improvements to their facility (i.e., home) as a top area of need.

Parent Aware as a support for families and early educators

Most Rated early educators see ways that their programs have benefited from being Parent Aware Rated, though few educators think Ratings helped attract families, and those in different program types may experience certain financial benefits differently. Most of the early educators from Rated programs who responded to the survey had positive perceptions of Parent Aware overall. Most felt it was worth the time and effort to be Rated, that their Ratings accurately reflected their quality, and that they knew what their program needed to do to earn a higher Rating. When we asked families and educators what quality in an ECE

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program means to them, we also found that their responses were well-aligned with Parent Aware's Standards and Indicators for defining ECE quality. In the survey, the majority of the Rated educators also agreed that their programs had experienced some benefits of being Rated, including access to Parent Aware grants, the ability to show off and/or improve the quality of their program, and increased support with ongoing learning and professional development. For some of the financial benefits of Parent Aware, however, there was variation in the extent to which Rated educators from different program types reported seeing those benefits. Rated center educators, for example, were more likely to report benefiting from access to Early Learning Scholarships, whereas Rated family child care educators were more likely to say they benefited from access to Parent Aware grants. Across all Rated programs, only around half of educators strongly agreed that they had benefited from increased subsidy reimbursement rates available to Three- and Four-Star Rated programs. (Notably, because centers tend to serve more children than family child care programs, we might expect that centers report more benefits from access to ELS and higher subsidy reimbursement rates because they likely serve more children who receive those benefits compared to family child care programs. This implies that centers may see a benefit from receiving higher revenues compared to programs that serve fewer children who receive ELS and child care subsidies.) The benefit that fewest early educators reported experiencing across program types was attracting families to their programs. Although some educators felt their families might not be aware of Parent Aware and how it has benefitted them, most did not feel that their Star Rating was a key factor in attracting more families to their program in the first place. And, given that many programs reported being at capacity, many further noted that they did not feel they needed a Rating to attract families.

Early educators think the best ways to make Parent Aware more accessible would be to simplify Rating requirements, increase financial benefits, and allow programs to join at any time and at their own pace. In response to survey questions, early educators from unrated programs explained why they did not currently participate in Parent Aware. These educators most often said they were not interested because they did not feel that Ratings accurately represent quality, they felt their programs were already high quality, or they did not think families cared about Ratings (or, did not need to attract families because they were already at maximum enrollment). Other unrated educators explained that they were open to participating but just did not see a clear benefit to becoming Rated and/or felt the Rating process was too difficult to be "worth it." In focus groups, even Rated educators emphasized that they experience a great deal of pressure managing Parent Aware requirements, as the process can be time consuming, particularly when programs are short on staff. Similarly, when asked about the top three strategies for making Parent Aware more accessible so more programs would join, educators who responded to the survey (including both Rated and unrated educators) most commonly suggested simplifying or reducing Rating requirements, increasing the financial benefits of being Rated, and allowing programs to join at any time and complete the Rating process at their own pace.

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Considerations for DCYF

The findings from this study offer insights into how families with young children and early educators experience Minnesota's ECE system as well as how the COVID-19 pandemic amplified many of the persistent challenges that have historically faced the sector. After an in-depth review of the findings in the context of other state-level initiatives related to ECE—including the Parent Aware Redesign, the Parent Aware Racial Equity Action Plan, and the Child Care Regulation Modernization Projects—our team identified the following overarching considerations for DCYF to reflect on as the agency continues these important efforts. We hope these considerations can aid in DCYF's ongoing work to strengthen Parent Aware and other systems of support so that all children, families, and early educators can equitably access the services and resources they need to thrive.

Prioritize increasing the supply of high-quality ECE programs equipped to meet families' diverse needs and expanding financial assistance options to help families afford care. Not all families in Minnesota can equitably access an ECE program that meets their needs, and many families say that finding affordable options has been more difficult since the COVID-19 pandemic. As DCYF continues efforts to support more ECE programs to become Rated or earn a higher Rating, consider ways to prioritize the areas in which families currently face disproportionate barriers to access. In our survey and focus groups, families noted that ECE options are particularly limited in rural and micropolitan areas of the state, as well as for those seeking certain types of care, such as programs that offer infant and toddler care, can accept multiple children, allow variable or flexible scheduling, or are able to care for children with disabilities. Although financial assistance options such as CCAP subsidies and the Early Learning Scholarships (ELS) are valuable resources that help many families afford ECE, the availability of these options is not sufficient to meet the needs of all income-eligible families in the state. Further, even though the majority of Rated educators who responded to the survey were Rated at the Three- or Four-Star Level, only around half of Rated educators felt they had benefited from the increased subsidy reimbursement rates. This could indicate that some educators either don't feel the increased reimbursement rates are enough to make a meaningful difference in their programs' finances or may simply not serve enough children receiving subsidy for the increased rates to make a financial difference. Notably, current eligibility requirements for CCAP and ELS may exclude some families who make just above the income eligibility threshold but still struggle to afford ECE. Expanding financial assistance offerings for families, and particularly to support those families who make too much to qualify for assistance now but not enough to meet their basic needs, could help ensure that all families in the state can equitably access ECE for their children during their formative years. Additional engagement with educators to understand their experiences with CCAP and ELS could further help DCYF identify barriers and opportunities for improvement.

To increase the supply of high-quality ECE, invest in strategies to increase wages, expand benefits, and create opportunities for advancement for the ECE workforce. Families' challenges accessing affordable and high-quality ECE are inextricably tied to the challenges facing the ECE workforce. The ECE sector, which was struggling even in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, [xxii] lost a record number of jobs during the pandemic as many programs were forced to close, and in 2023, had still not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels. [xxiii] In our survey and focus groups, early educators noted that various factors—such as low compensation, insufficient benefits, burdensome regulations, and a lack of respect for the field—may continue to drive more educators out of the workforce. As DCYF explores potential changes to Parent Aware as part of the Redesign, consider opportunities to invest in increased wages and other supports for the ECE workforce. Without increasing tuition costs for families, programs have very limited ability to address these challenges on their own. While Parent Aware may not be the appropriate mechanism for addressing workforce wages and benefits at a system level, DCYF and their partners may still be able to support change in this area by advocating for a more significant and sustained public investment in ECE. DCYF could also support programs in the interim by continuing to promote initiatives such as the Great Start Compensation Support Payment Program and REETAIN, both of which provide supplemental funding to early educators. DCYF's messaging and public communications

about Parent Aware could also provide an opportunity for the state to emphasize the crucial role of ECE and shift public perceptions to recognize early educators as the professionals they are.

Target professional development and financial supports to the unique needs of early educators in different ECE settings and explore ways to continually monitor those needs and adjust offerings over time. Our findings identified several areas in which early educators in different types of ECE settings experience different challenges and also want different kinds of support to address them. For example, although all educators may benefit from financial assistance to help support higher wages and improved benefits for staff, center educators may need additional support in this area. Because centers have more complex staffing needs, these programs could benefit from assistance with developing stronger recruitment and retention strategies as well as plans for implementing changes incrementally over time to avoid placing additional cost burden on families. On the other hand, family child care educators—who typically provide care in their own home and may not have any other staff—may benefit from more opportunities to connect with and learn from other ECE educators and more ongoing professional development. Because family child care programs do not have dedicated administrative staff, these educators may also benefit from targeted support on business administration, financial management, and staying in compliance with licensing and other requirements (e.g., Parent Aware).

Ensure early educators have the support they need to feel confident in promoting children's social-emotional development and self-regulation skills, keeping in mind that children's development is shaped by many factors above and beyond their ECE program. Despite the unprecedented context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its negative impacts on the ECE sector, our surveys found that both families and educators feel children are on track in most areas of their learning and development. However, many educators, and particularly center educators, had some concerns about children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills. These concerns could be due to a number of reasons. It could be that some children are struggling in these areas due to lost learning and socialization time during the pandemic (as some educators hypothesized), or it could be that educators and/or families need more education and training to understand what age-appropriate development looks like in these areas and how to support children if there are concerns. Notably, many of the center educators who responded to the survey were in an administrative role at their program (e.g., a Center Director), so it could also be that these respondents answered our questions drawing on what they have heard from their staff, which may be more biased toward challenging situations in classrooms rather than positive ones. Although it was beyond the scope of this study to determine the nature or cause of educators' concerns, our findings nonetheless highlight that programs may need more targeted professional development to understand and effectively support children's social-emotional and self-regulation skills. DCYF could work with their partners across the state to expand training, coaching, and other professional development opportunities in these areas, including the use of developmental assessments to support tailored instruction and care for young children. It may also be beneficial to continue engaging educators and/or families to understand their views of children's development, as trends in children's strengths and areas of need may shift over time as new social and contextual factors emerge. Additionally, building on the Minnesota's Successful Learner Equation, which emphasizes that children's development is shaped by a complex network of factors, including their family, their community, their school or ECE program, and state-level systems and policies, it is important to consider and increase the key mechanisms of support in each of these areas.

Explore revisions to Parent Aware to ensure early educators feel the Rating process is fair, meaningful, and worth their time and effort, and expand marketing efforts following the Redesign to ensure programs and families have accurate information. Parent Aware can be a time-consuming process for programs, so understanding how programs experience the Rating process, including any barriers or incentives to becoming Rated, is crucial for building a strong and equitable system that meets the needs of early educators. Our findings highlight that it will be important for DCYF to continue to work with partners to more effectively market Parent Aware across the state. Although Rated educators generally had positive perceptions of Parent Aware and felt that being Rated had benefited their programs, unrated educators had much more mixed perceptions. Many unrated educators were hesitant to join because they don't see a clear benefit to their program or perceive that the

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process is too difficult or time consuming. These perceptions could be shaped by a number of factors. For example, it may be that some unrated educators simply do not know much about Parent Aware because they have had limited exposure, or perhaps that they tried to learn about Parent Aware but found existing materials and messaging unclear. Alternatively, some educators may only know what they have heard about Parent Aware through word-of-mouth, meaning their negative perceptions could be shaped by what they have heard from other educators. Regardless of where these perceptions originated, our findings highlight a need for more targeted marketing to spread information about the benefits of Parent Aware—and particularly to communicate any changes to the system following the Parent Aware Redesign. Educators may be more motivated to join or seek a higher Rating if they have a strong understanding of the process, have support to overcome any barriers, and feel that the benefits of being Rated are worth the effort. Importantly, efforts to market Parent Aware may also need to target families. Few educators agreed that Ratings were helpful for marketing their programs to families, and families likewise noted that the limited availability of ECE means that some families are not able to pick and choose a program based on factors such as Ratings. DCYF should keep this in mind when developing communications about Parent Aware targeted at families. Additionally, as noted in the Limitations section of this report, the families who our team engaged in the survey and focus groups were predominantly White and English-speaking. DCYF should prioritize engaging more families from diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds to better understand how well Parent Aware's quality standards reflect their values and priorities, as well as how they perceive Parent Aware and the extent to which they consider Ratings when searching for ECE. As new educators enter the workforce and new families need ECE for their young children, DCYF can continue to engage families and educators to understand their perceptions and then update marketing and communications strategies accordingly.

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Appendix A: Additional Data from the Early Educator Survey

Table A. Educator-reported program changes post-pandemic

Program changes	2023			2022 or before			No changes		
	Center-based programs (n=192)	Family child care programs (n=241)	Overall (n=433)	Center-based programs (n=192)	Family child care programs (n=241)	Overall (n=433)	Center-based programs (n=192)	Family child care programs (n=241)	Overall (n=433)
Had higher operational costs	60%	54%	57%	32%	32%	32%	19%	24%	22%
Centers only: Had higher staff turnover or trouble finding enough staff	52%	N/A	52%	35%	N/A	35%	29%	N/A	29%
Had fewer children enrolled	34%	27%	30%	42%	21%	30%	38%	51%	45%
Had lower attendance in an average day	26%	27%	26%	41%	24%	31%	41%	49%	45%
Offered more flexible scheduling options to accommodate families' needs	21%	23%	22%	21%	27%	24%	58%	51%	54%
Offered fewer slots	17%	11%	14%	20%	7%	13%	66%	77%	72%
Reduced hours of operation	13%	11%	12%	23%	11%	16%	65%	76%	71%
Closed (either temporarily or permanently)	5%	4%	4%	36%	15%	24%	58%	77%	69%

Source: Child Trends Early Educator Survey (2024)

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Table B. Descriptions of ECE quality factors for family survey

ECE quality factors	Description
Teaching & relationships with children	Staff at the program/caregivers have caring relationships with my child and provide a quality and engaging learning environment. Staff/caregivers use a research-based curriculum and support my child in the transition to kindergarten.
Relationships with families	The program/caregiver communicates with my family, offers opportunities to engage with the program and my child's learning, and staff respect and support my family's culture and language.
Assessments & planning for each individual child	Staff at the program/caregivers know my child well, understand their development, and use this information to plan lessons.
Professionalism	Staff at the program/caregivers have professional preparation on caring for young children, including higher education, ongoing training, and support.
Health & safety	The program/care setting is a safe and healthy environment for my child and provides nutritious food and opportunities for active play.
Cultural responsiveness	The program/caregiver uses materials and activities to teach children about different types of families or cultural traditions. The racial and cultural diversity of program staff/caregivers and languages used reflect the diversity of children and families served.
Social-emotional learning	Staff/caregivers support children's social and emotional development by helping them name and develop skills to manage big feelings, emotions, and conflict. Disciplinary practices are used thoughtfully and consistently among all children.

Source: Child Trends Family Survey (2024)

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