



Minnesota Child Care Choices:

Child Care Decision-Making and Perceptions of Quality

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Introduction to the Minnesota Child Care Choices Research Brief Series

The purpose of this Research Brief Series is to summarize key findings and implications from the Minnesota Child Care Choices study, a three-year longitudinal survey of a sample of parents with low incomes who have at least one child age six or younger, have applied to receive financial assistance through Minnesota's welfare or child care subsidy programs, and lived in one of seven participating counties at the time of the baseline survey. Telephone surveys are conducted by Wilder Research every 5-6 months, starting in August 2009, and include questions about families' characteristics, parents' child care preferences, the processes

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OVERVIEW

The purpose of this Research Brief is to describe how Minnesota parents with low incomes make child care decisions and describe the child care arrangements they choose. Parents in the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study were asked about the process they used to make child care decisions for one child, age six or under. Specifically, parents were asked what sources of information they used to learn about child care options, which of these sources were ultimately used to find their primary care arrangement, the number of care options they considered, the steps they took in selecting a provider, the factors that affected their choices, their priorities in selecting a child care arrangement, and the difficulty of selecting their care arrangement. Parents were also asked whether they were aware of and used Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), called Parent Aware.¹ Findings discussed in this brief are based on responses to the first survey wave of the Minnesota Child Care Choices study.

Parents' Child Care Decision-Making Process and Their Perceptions of Quality

What information sources do parents rely on to learn about available child care options?²

Parents in this study rely nearly equally on professional sources of information, and informal sources, including the Internet. The sources of information on child care options most frequently cited by parents were social service professionals (for example, social workers, case managers, home visitors, parent mentors, and county workers, 40%); friends, co-workers, and/or neighbors (39%); and the Internet (37%). Other sources, such as relatives (20%), Minnesota's Child Care Resource and Referral Network (14%), and the newspapers/yellow pages (10%) were also cited.

How do parents first learn about the primary child care arrangement they use?

Over half of respondents stated they learned of the setting they use as their child's primary care arrangement from a relative (46%), or from a friend, co-worker, or neighbor (17%). About half of



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¹ Detailed information about parents' awareness and use of QRIS can be found in: Isner, T., Blasberg, A., Tout, K., Carlin, C., Davis, E., & Forry, N. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Families' Awareness and Use of a Pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

² Note: Parents could select more than one source of information.

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parents use to make child care decisions, parents' familiarity with and use of Parent Aware, Minnesota's pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), parents' perceptions of the quality of their child care, child care-related work disruptions, parental employment, and use of public assistance programs.

For each family, one child is designated as the focal child and detailed information is collected about the child care arrangements used for this child. In addition to the survey data, this study uses administrative data from the Minnesota child care subsidy program to track participants' use of subsidies and the type of subsidized care arrangements they use over time.

The Minnesota Child Care Choices Research Briefs are designed to answer questions of interest to state child care administrators, county agency staff and other early childhood stakeholders. The questions they have include: How do parents make decisions about child care arrangements? What factors affect whether a family uses child care subsidies? How will Minnesota's QRIS affect families with low incomes, particularly those eligible to receive a child care subsidy? What family, community, and child care characteristics affect child care stability and reliability, and parents' employment outcomes?

This brief is based on data from the baseline survey of the Minnesota Child Care Choices study. Readers who want additional details about the study design and the sample of parents who participated in the baseline survey are referred to the Study and Sample Description Brief. The entire series of baseline briefs is available online at: www.mdmnresearchpartnership.com.

parents were aware of websites that provide a list of child care providers. However, only 17% knew of a source where they could get information on the quality of care offered by providers.

Do parents consider multiple options when making a child care choice?

The majority of parents (56%) reported that they did not seriously consider options other than the one they selected for their child. This was true regardless of the child's age, the family's income, or whether or not they used a child care subsidy. Of those that did not seriously consider other options, more than half (55%) did not believe there were other realistic options for them.

Of those who **did** seriously consider other options, the types of care they considered differed somewhat by the child's age. Parents of preschoolers were more likely than parents of toddlers to consider programs such as Head Start and pre-K, while parents of school-aged children were more likely than parents of younger children to consider using a friend, family member, or neighbor as their child care provider.

Among parents who **did** seriously consider other options, the single greatest proportion, about one-third, considered two options; the average number of providers considered was between three and four. The majority of parents who seriously considered other options both called and visited potential providers (84%), though a small percentage (11%) reported only calling providers, and 3% reported doing neither.

What other factors are related to parents' child care choices?

Child Care Assistance. Overall, less than one-quarter of parents reported that the availability of child care assistance or subsidy from the county affected their selection for their child's primary arrangement. However, this differed by families' income level. About 20% of families living in poverty ($\leq 100\%$ FPL) and nearly 40% of families with incomes between 100% and 175% of FPL reported that subsidy availability impacted their decision.³

Multiple Children in the Household. Among families with multiple children, 17% reported that arranging care for other children in their family influenced their selection of the child's primary arrangement. This percentage also varied by income, with fewer families living in poverty ($\leq 100\%$ FPL; 11%) reporting that arranging care for other children influenced their decision, compared to 33% and 38% of families with higher incomes (100%-175% FPL, and $\geq 175\%$ FPL, respectively).

Children's Special Needs. Few parents (8; 2%) reported that their child has a behavioral problem that made it difficult to find a care provider. However, among the small percentage (15; 5%) who reported their child's activities were limited due to a health problem or impairment, about half (8; 53%) reported their child's condition affected their child care choices.

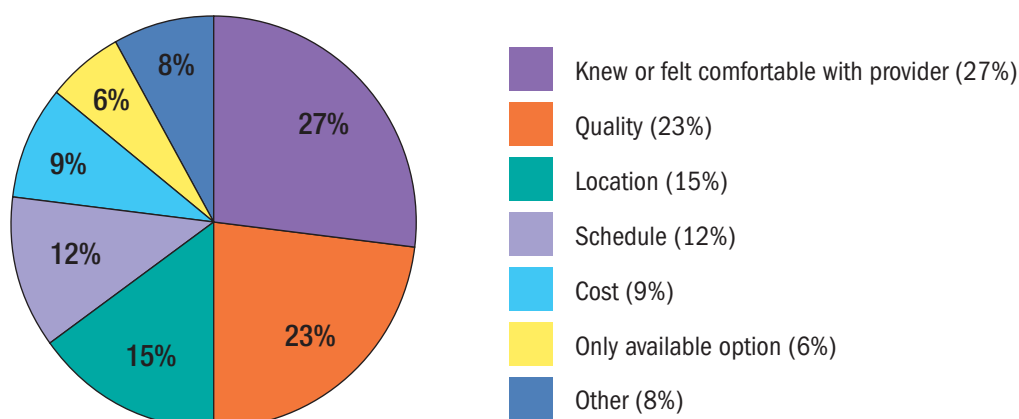
What are parents' priorities in selecting child care arrangements?

When asked for the "main reason" the child's primary child care arrangement was selected, the most common reasons were knowing or trusting the provider (27%), quality (23%),⁴ location (convenience or proximity to home; 15%), schedule (matching work schedule; 12%), cost (9%), and the selected provider being the only available option (6%). Other reasons cited included the provider being the best choice, the focal child having special needs, the primary care provider speaking the family's native language with the child, preference for a specific type of care setting, and health and safety concerns (see Figure 1).

³ Approximately half of the families in the sample used a subsidy in the baseline time period. Statistics on families' subsidy use will be tracked over the course of the longitudinal study. For more information on families' subsidy use see: Davis, E., Blasberg, A., Tout, K., Carlin, C., Forry, N., & Isner, T. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Families' Participation in the Child Care Assistance Program*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

⁴ Parents' definitions of quality are summarized later in this Brief.

FIGURE 1: Main reason parents chose their child's primary child care arrangement



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

What factors are related to parents' priorities in selecting child care arrangements?

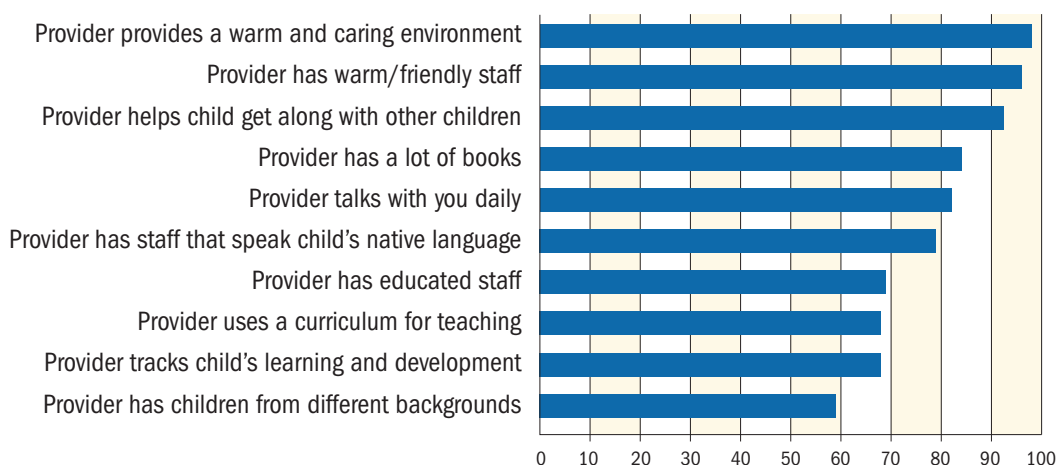
The age of the child and families' use of subsidies were related to parents' priorities in selecting child care arrangements. Families of infants were most likely to name knowing or trusting the provider as their primary selection criterion (38%). Families of toddlers were equally likely to base their decision on trust and quality (29% and 28%, respectively) and families of preschool-aged children were most likely to select care based on quality (29%). Families of school-aged children were most likely to select an arrangement because it was their only available option or it matched their parents' work schedules (42% and 33%, respectively).

Among all families **not using** a subsidy, parents were most likely to base their decision on trust of the caregiver (32%), but these families also relied on quality (16%), location (15%), cost (13%), and schedule (12%) to make their decision. Families **using** a subsidy were most likely to rely on program quality (32%), but also relied on knowing or trusting the provider (22%), location (15%), and schedule (11%).

Which indicators of high-quality care are most important to parents?

Parents were asked to rate the importance of ten indicators of high-quality care. Of those indicators, two were rated as "extremely important" by at least 95% of the parents: the provider offering a warm and caring environment, and having a warm and friendly staff (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: Percentage of parents rating indicators of high-quality as "extremely important"



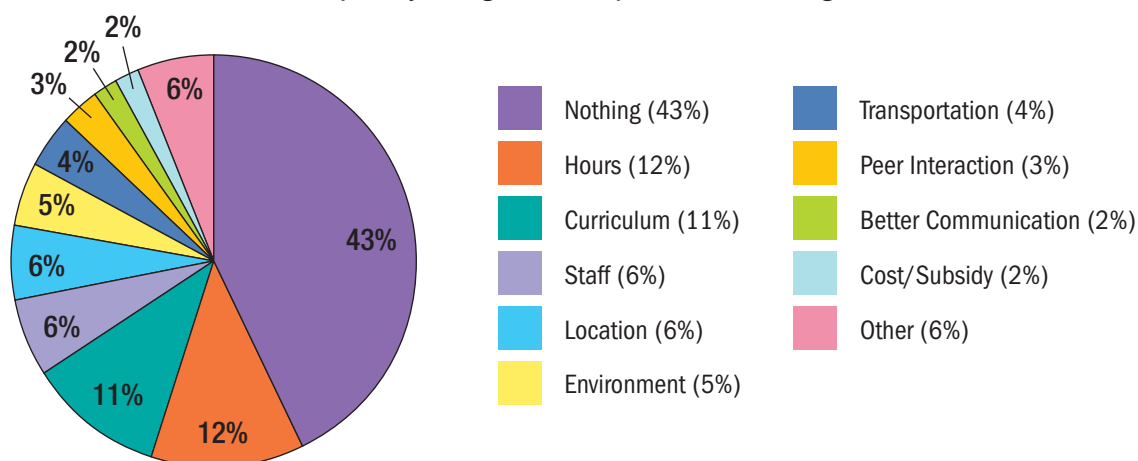
SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

How satisfied are parents with their primary child care arrangement?

Generally speaking, parents are very satisfied with their primary care arrangements. The majority of parents (82%) reported that their current primary arrangement is their first choice for child care. The majority of parents also reported having few to no doubts about recommending their provider to a friend; 65% of parents would “strongly recommend” their provider and 32% would “recommend” their provider.

Forty-three percent of parents said if they could change one thing about their provider, they would not change anything (see Figure 3). Frequently cited characteristics parents would change include having extended hours that start earlier in the morning or go later into the evening (12%), having more stimulating learning activities or outdoor playtime included in the curricula (11%), and a more convenient location (6%). Six percent of parents stated they would prefer their child’s provider be more attentive to the child, have more knowledge, or have more training. Other characteristics of the care setting parents would change include environmental features of the care setting (including having more space in the setting or eliminating children’s exposure to the provider’s cigarette smoke; 5%), transportation services to/from the provider (4%), more opportunities for children’s interactions with peers (3%), better communication between parents and providers (2%), and lower fees or more prompt subsidy payments from the county (2%).

FIGURE 3: Elements of the child’s primary arrangement that parents would change



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

How difficult do parents find the child care decision-making process?

The majority of parents in the sample (64%) rated the child care decision-making process as somewhat or very easy, while over one-quarter (28%) reported that the process was somewhat difficult. The child’s age, the family’s income, or whether the family received a child care subsidy did not affect how easy parents found the child care decision-making process.

Among parents who reported using some type of non-parental care for their child (283 parents), 42% made their decisions in one week or less, 20% made their decisions within two weeks, and 18% spent three to four weeks deciding. The remainder of parents spent longer than one month making their decision. This time frame did not vary by the age of the child or family income.

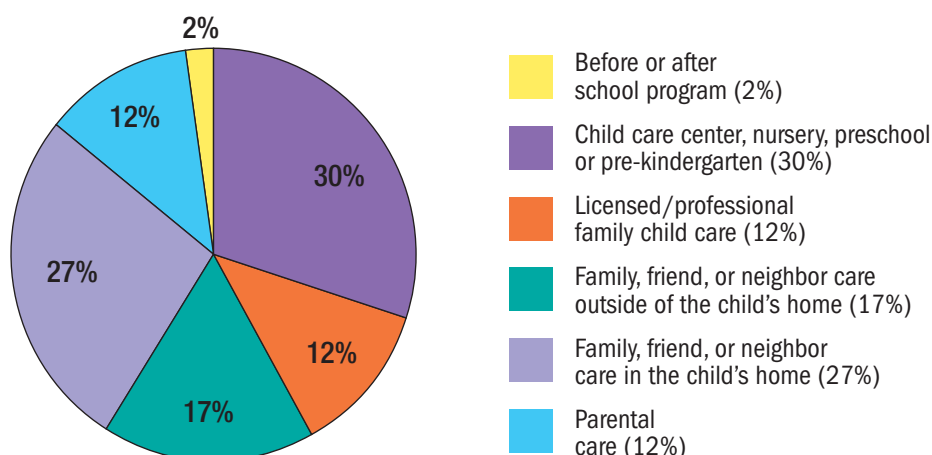
Child Care Choices

What types of child care do parents use?

Figure 4 shows the different types of primary care arrangements that children in the sample experience. Just over one-tenth of children (12%) were cared for exclusively by their parents. The majority of children in the sample (44%) were cared for in family, friend, or neighbor care as their primary arrangement, 27% in the child’s home and 17% outside of the child’s home.

About one-third of children (30%) were in some type of center-based care including child care centers, nursery schools, preschools, Head Start, pre-kindergarten, or School Readiness programs. An additional 12% of children were cared for in licensed or professional family child care.⁵ Finally, 2% of children had before or after school programs as their primary care arrangement.

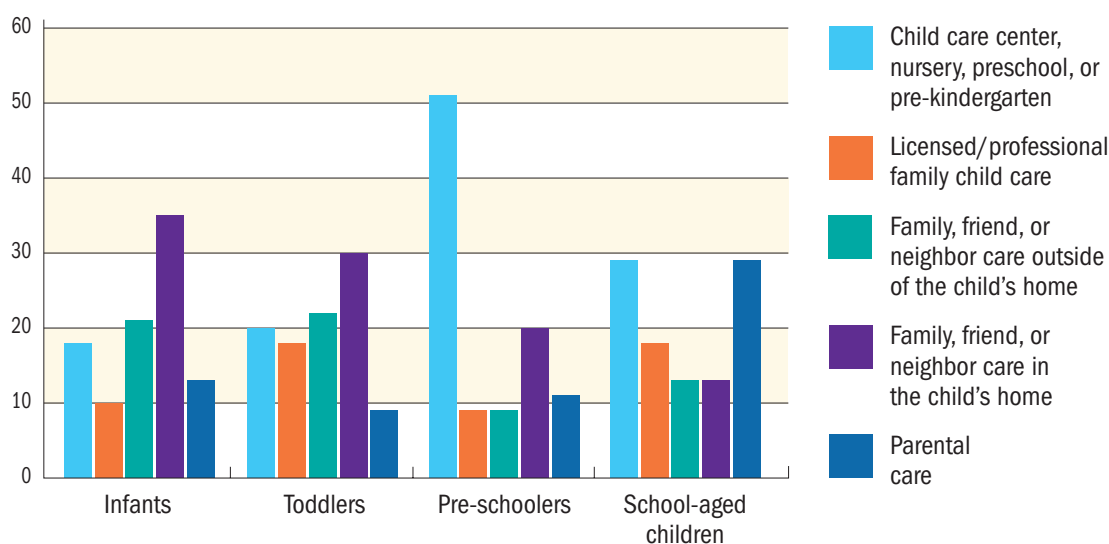
FIGURE 4: Type of primary child care arrangement



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

Primary care arrangements differed by the age of the child (see Figure 5). The majority of preschool-age children were in center-based care (51%), while infants and toddlers were most likely to be cared for in family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home (36% and 30% respectively). School-aged children were most likely to either be cared for exclusively by their parents or in center-based care (with 27% of children in each of these arrangements).

FIGURE 5: Type of primary child care arrangement by child's age

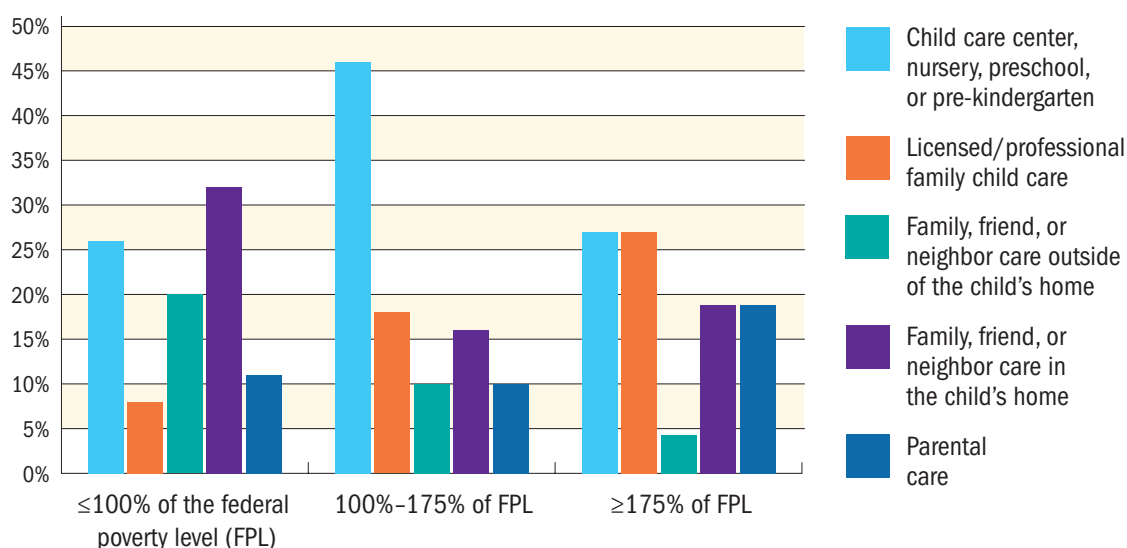


SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

⁵ Licensed or professional family child care programs were distinguished from family, friend, or neighbor care in two different ways. First, if the parent reported the provider as a professional baby-sitter or nanny, he/she was considered licensed/professional. Second, if the parent reported that the caregiver met both of the following criteria: 1) the caregiver provides child care as their primary job, and 2) the provider cares for children other than the focal child who are not related to either the provider or the focal child's parent, they were considered licensed/professional.

Primary care arrangements also differed by household income level (see Figure 6). Families earning incomes at or below the federal poverty line were most likely to use family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home (32%). In contrast, the greatest proportion (46%) of children in the group with incomes between 100% and 175% of the federal poverty level were cared for in center-based settings. The arrangements used most often by families with incomes of 175% FPL or higher were center-based or licensed/professional family child care (with 27% of children in each of these arrangements).

FIGURE 6: Type of primary child care arrangement by income level

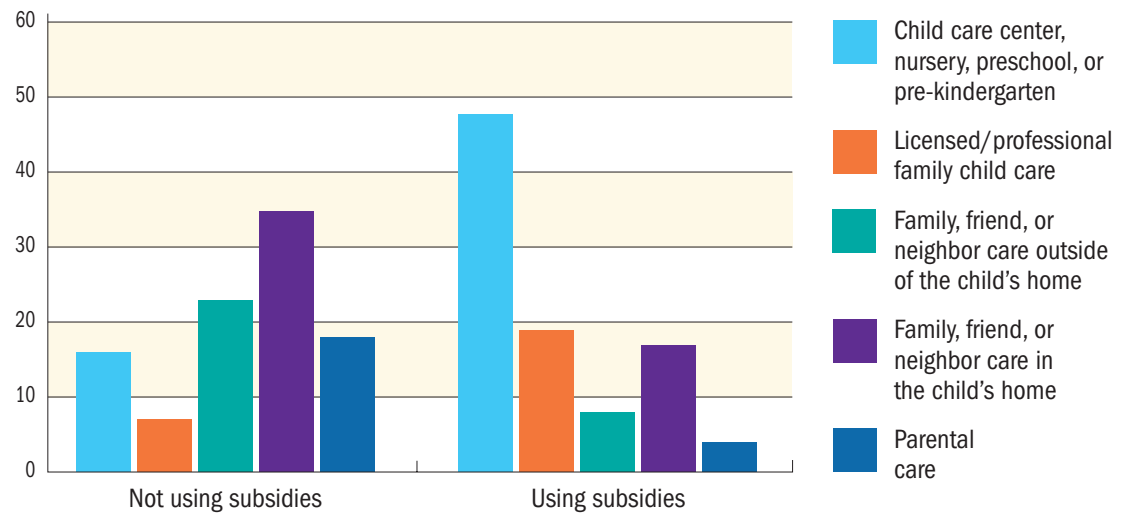


SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

There were also differences in primary care arrangement between families who were and were not receiving a child care subsidy for their child's care (see Figure 7).⁶ Compared to children without a subsidy, children whose care was subsidized were less likely to use parental care (6% versus 17%), and less likely to be cared for in family, friend or neighbor care either in the child's home (18% versus 35%) or outside of the child's home (8% versus 24%). Children whose care was subsidized were more likely to be in a center-based arrangement than children whose care was not subsidized: 48% versus 16%, respectively.

⁶Note that Figure 7 displays the child's primary care arrangement, while the subsidy may be used for a secondary arrangement.

FIGURE 7: Type of primary child care arrangement by subsidy use



SOURCE: Minnesota Child Care Choices Wave 1 survey data

How many hours per week are children cared for in different primary arrangements?

Children whose primary care arrangement was center-based spent an average of 29 hours per week in this arrangement, compared to an average of 31 hours per week for children whose primary care arrangement was licensed/professional family child care. Children primarily cared for by family, friends, or neighbors (either in the child's home or outside of the child's home) were in care, on average, 16 hours per week.⁷

What percentage of parents use multiple child care arrangements, and how many total hours do children spend in multiple arrangements?

Multiple child care arrangements were reported for 28% of children. Of these multiple arrangements, the most frequent combinations were family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home and outside of the child's home (36%), center-based care combined with family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home (28%), and center-based care combined with family, friend, or neighbor care outside of the child's home (14%).

Children who were in a combination of family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home and outside of the child's home were in care for an average of 32 hours per week. Children in a combination of center-based and family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home were in care for an average of 40 hours per week, and children in a combination of center-based and out-of-home family, friend, or neighbor care were in care for an average of 33 hours per week.

What are the features of licensed/professional family child care settings?

Almost all (97%) of the licensed/professional family child care providers cared for other children in addition to the focal child. In 89% of instances where the provider cared for additional children, at least one of the children was unrelated to the provider or the focal child. Licensed/professional providers cared for an average of seven children, according to parent report. Eighty-nine percent of parents reported that they paid for care provided by licensed/professional family child care providers.

⁷ Note: These hours reflect the time a child spent in their primary care arrangement. These figures do not reflect the total hours children spent in non-parental care across multiple arrangements.

Who provides family, friend, or neighbor care outside of the child's home?

Of the 93 family, friend or neighbor caregivers, 82% were relatives, 15% were friends, and 3% were neighbors. Roughly one-quarter (27%) of parents reported that they paid family, friend, or neighbor providers caring for children outside the child's home. Half of friends providing care were paid, a third of neighbors were paid, and about one-quarter of relatives were paid (22%).

Just under half (49%) of caregivers outside of the child's home cared for children in addition to the focal child. The majority of these caregivers (89%) did not care for any children who were unrelated to themselves or the focal child. Family, friends and neighbors providing care outside of the child's home served three children, including the focal child, on average.

Who provides family, friend, or neighbor care inside the child's own home?

Of the 130 family, friends, or neighbors providing care in the child's home, most (79%) were relatives. More than half (58%) of children who received care inside their home had only one caregiver, 31% had two caregivers, and 11% had three or more caregivers. Most of the providers caring for a child in the child's own home were at least 18 years of age (93%), though 2% of children were cared for by someone between the ages of 13-15 years, and one child in the sample was cared for by someone under 13 years of age. About three-quarters (74%) of families using care in the child's home did not pay the provider.

Implications, New Questions, and Next Steps

The baseline survey conducted for the Minnesota Child Care Choices Study provides insights into both the process and the outcome of families' child care decision-making. The findings illustrate a range of opportunities and constraints that families encounter when making their decisions. Families have a variety of resources for information available to them, including formal sources, such as caseworkers, and informal sources, such as relatives, and the Internet. Families prioritize different features when considering care arrangements, including quality, convenience, and trustworthiness; these priorities differ somewhat, depending on the age of the child. When asked about the quality features that are most important to them, families consistently indicated a warm and caring environment and friendly staff to be of utmost importance. More formal indicators of quality, such as the use of a curriculum, tracking of children's development and the education level of staff, were also extremely important to parents, but received slightly lower rankings than other features.

Just over half of the families in the study seriously considered only one option for their child, and the remainder reported considering more than one option. Family income played a role in the number of options considered, with families with incomes at or above 175% of the federal poverty level considering twice as many providers as families living in poverty (an average of six providers, compared to an average of three, respectively).

While most families reported that the process of making child care decisions was somewhat or very easy, about a third of the sample reported that the process was more difficult. Families who have a child with special needs are particularly likely to encounter difficulties in finding care.

The availability of subsidies played a significant role in the decision-making process for some families, but not for others. Families living in poverty were less likely than subsidy-eligible families with relatively higher incomes to report that the availability of a subsidy affected their child care decision. However, use of a subsidy was strongly related to the type of arrangement families ultimately selected for their child. Nearly 50% of families with a subsidy selected center-based care, compared to only 16% of families without a subsidy.

The majority of families in the study (nearly 60%) use home-based care as their primary arrangement. Of these families, 21% used licensed/professional family child care providers and the remainder used family, friend, or neighbor care.

These findings have important implications, and raise new questions for both researchers and state policy-makers to consider about the process families with low-incomes use to find child care, the child care features they prioritize, the arrangements they choose, and the sources of support they find most useful.

The Process of Finding Child Care

It is noteworthy that over half of families seriously considered only one child care arrangement for their young child, and that many families report that the process of finding child care was quite easy. Tracking these families over time will provide helpful information about how these arrangements ultimately work out for families. We will also investigate whether having engaged in a more extensive search process leads to care that families rate as being of higher quality.

Because families report that they use both formal and informal sources of information about child care, as well as the Internet, there are opportunities to assist parents with their search and educate parents about options that may be available to them. When families did consider multiple options, income played a clear role in the number of providers they considered. Thus, at least for some families, having access to financial resources expands the options that they considered in their search.

The first survey wave of the Minnesota Child Care Choices study was conducted early in the implementation of Parent Aware, Minnesota's pilot QRIS. As a result, Parent Aware did not appear to play a significant role in the search process for most of these families.⁸

Families' Priorities for Child Care

The families in this study prioritized many of the features that families of all income-levels cite: quality, convenience, cost and trust (see also results from the 2009 Statewide Minnesota Household Child Care Survey⁹). Because policymakers want to support families in their selection of higher quality care through the QRIS, it is important to explore further how families define and perceive quality. Future work will address this question in more depth to understand the quality features that are most important to families. This information can help policymakers to develop QRIS information that is more relevant to families, and to work with providers to improve and support these features of quality in their programs.

The Child Care Arrangements that Families Choose

Family, friend, or neighbor care (either in the child's home or outside of the child's home) is the most frequently selected type of primary arrangement for the families in this study. This finding is similar to that reported from the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey.¹⁰ The quality of home-based care has already been identified as a priority by Minnesota child care administrators, who have developed an initiative aimed specifically at supporting family, friend and neighbor caregivers. This study's findings reinforce the need to continue these efforts, given the large percentage of children from families with low-incomes who are cared for by family, friend, and neighbor providers.

Sources of Support for Child Care Choices

Child care subsidies played an important role in supporting the choices of families in this study. Though few parents reported that the availability of a child care subsidy affected their selection of child care, nearly half of the families receiving subsidies used the funding to select more formal child care options, such as child care centers. In the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey, families with low incomes who received a subsidy and selected child care centers rated the quality of their arrangement more highly than did families with low incomes who did not receive a subsidy.

⁸For more in-depth information on parents' use of Parent Aware, see: Isner, T., Blasberg, A., Tout, K., Carlin, C., Davis, E., & Forry, N. (2011). *Minnesota Child Care Choices: Families' Awareness and Use of a Pilot Quality Rating and Improvement System*. Minneapolis, MN: Child Trends & University of Minnesota.

⁹Chase, R. & Valorose, J. (2010). *Child Care Use in Minnesota: Report of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey*. Wilder Research: St. Paul, MN.

¹⁰Ibid.

It would be helpful to know more about how the families using subsidies find the center-based arrangements they use. Are they likely to find the arrangement first and then seek the subsidy, or does the subsidy support their search process? Looking further at the interplay of subsidy availability and the search process will be a focus of further analyses in this study.

Understanding Family Differences

Finally, it is clear from the findings reported in this Brief that families vary widely in how they make decisions regarding child care. Even among families with similar characteristics (such as having very young children and low incomes), the process of decision-making and choices made vary significantly. Future work will be aimed at understanding these variations and their implications for program and policy decisions.