



## Maryland Child Care Choices Study: Child Care Decision-Making Process and Child Care Choices among Applicants for Temporary Cash Assistance

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### Introduction to the Maryland Child Care Choices Research Brief Series

The purpose of this Research Brief Series is to summarize key findings and implications from the Maryland Child Care Choices study, a two-year longitudinal survey of parents who were applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in 2011. Families in the Maryland Child Care Choices study have at least one child age six or younger and lived in one of the following counties at the time of their first interview: Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Baltimore City, Calvert, Carroll, Montgomery, and Prince George's.

This brief is based on data from the baseline survey of the

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### OVERVIEW

This Research Brief explores the child care decision-making processes among parents who recently applied for Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) in Maryland. Key findings from this Brief address the sources of information parents use in learning about care arrangements, the duration and difficulty of their search process, and their priorities and child care choices.

- The majority of parents in this study used the Internet to learn about their options, but chose a provider that they learned about from friends, family members, neighbors, or co-workers.
- Most parents (45%) made their child care decision in one week or less, though almost a quarter took longer than one month to choose an arrangement.
- One in four parents indicated the decision-making process was somewhat or very difficult.
- Over half of parents (51%) only seriously considered one child care arrangement when selecting a provider for their child. Of these parents, 57% believed there were no other realistic options worth considering.
- Parents' priorities for child care differed somewhat, depending on household income and whether the child's care was subsidized. Impoverished parents were more likely to cite trust/comfort with the caregiver as their top priority, whereas parents in households living above the poverty line, and those using subsidized care, were more likely to cite the quality of the care arrangement as being most important.
- Overall, most children in the sample (aged 0 to 6 years) were cared for in child care centers or family, friend, or neighbor care. Children in subsidized care and preschool-aged children were most likely to be cared for in a child care center. More than half of children not in subsidized care were cared for by family, friends, or neighbors in the child's home.
- On average, children in the sample spent 25 hours per week in child care and one-quarter were in multiple care arrangements.



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Maryland Child Care Choices study. Telephone surveys were conducted by Wilder Research every six months, starting in July 2011. Surveys included questions on the following topics: parents' child care preferences, the processes parents use to make child care decisions, parents' perceptions of the quality of their child care, child care-related work disruptions, parental employment, and the 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.

For more information about the study design and sample for this brief, see the Study and Sample Description Brief in this series. The entire series of baseline briefs are available online at [www.mdmresearch-partnership.com](http://www.mdmresearch-partnership.com) or [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

These findings, discussed in greater detail in this Research Brief, have important implications for policy and practice. The finding that the majority of TCA applicants in the sample are making quick child care decisions and considering very few options highlights the need to provide parents with accessible information about child care options and the quality of these arrangements, and to time the provision of information with parents' search process. Maryland has recently developed a Quality Rating and Improvement System, Maryland EXCELS. This system provides child care providers with standards to guide quality improvement, and parents with quality ratings that can be used in selecting a care arrangement. Maryland EXCELS is currently in its pilot phase. As the system is rolled out statewide, it will be important to ensure that a high density of child care programs participate (particularly programs in areas where low-income families live) and that information is presented to parents in an accessible and meaningful way.

In addition to Maryland EXCELS, information about child care subsidies and what to look for in selecting high quality care could be targeted directly to parents through television, radio, and newspaper media.<sup>1</sup> Information about families' child care options could also be disseminated to families through case managers that are knowledgeable about child care subsidies as well as Head Start, and pre-kindergarten programs for which the family may be eligible. Finally, as parents in the study tended to select a child care arrangement recommended to them by friends, family members, neighbors, or co-workers, information on Maryland EXCELS, the availability of subsidized and free child care/early education, and what high quality care looks like should also be disseminated to trusted entities within communities (e.g., churches and neighborhood associations).

## INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of the Maryland Child Care Choices study is to provide information about how TCA applicants with young children make child care decisions and the factors that influence their child care arrangement choices. Parents in the sample were asked about the process they used to make child care decisions for one randomly selected focal child, age six or under. Specifically, parents were asked about what types of resources and information they used to learn about child care options, which of those sources were actually used to find their primary care arrangement, the number of options they considered, factors and priorities related to their child care decision-making, and the difficulty of selecting their care arrangement. Additionally, parents were asked about their child's primary child care arrangement, the number of hours care is used per week, and use of multiple care arrangements. This Research Brief describes the decision-making process of parents based on responses to the baseline survey wave of the Maryland Child Care Choices study.

<sup>1</sup> Texas has used media campaigns to increase parents' awareness of the importance of selecting a licensed child care provider, see [http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child\\_Care/dontbeinthedark/](http://www.dfps.state.tx.us/Child_Care/dontbeinthedark/) for more information.

## What information sources do parents rely on to learn about available child care options?<sup>2</sup>

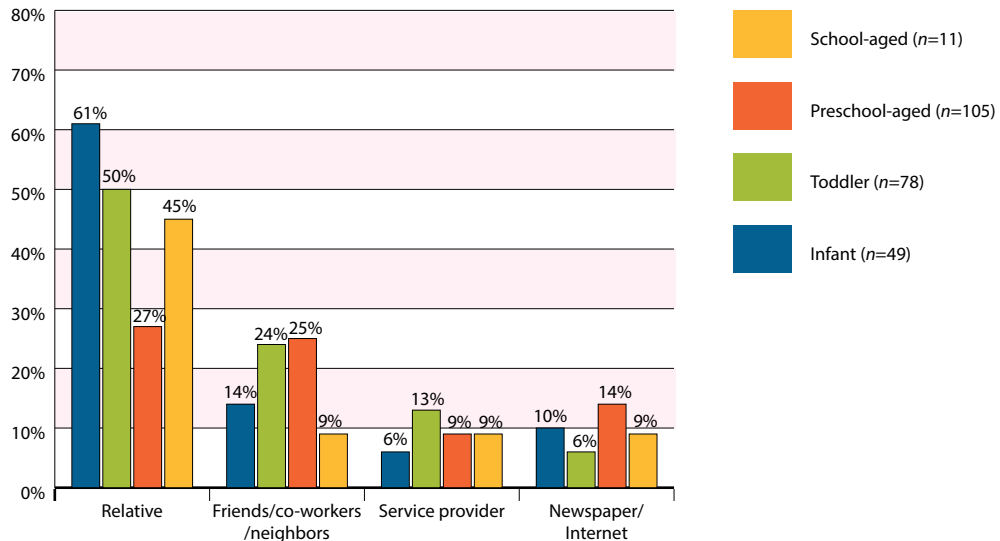
Most parents who used a non-parental care arrangement relied on the Internet (63%) for information on child care options. Other frequently-cited sources of information included friends, co-workers, and/or neighbors (26%); social service professionals (for example, social workers, case managers, and home visitors; 23%); relatives (16%); and print media (for example, newspapers, yellow pages, books, or magazines; 16%).

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

Most parents learned about the care arrangement they chose for their child from people they knew personally. The majority of parents in this study first learned about their child's primary care arrangement from relatives (42%) or friends, co-workers, or neighbors (22%). Slightly more than one-tenth of all parents said they first found out about their child's primary care arrangement from the newspaper or the Internet (11%).

The way in which parents first learned about the arrangement they ultimately chose for their child differed somewhat by the age of their child. Reliance on information from relatives was particularly prevalent among parents of infants and toddlers, whereas parents of preschoolers learned about their care arrangement from a variety of sources (see Figure 1 for details).

FIGURE 1: How parents first learned about primary child care arrangement by child age

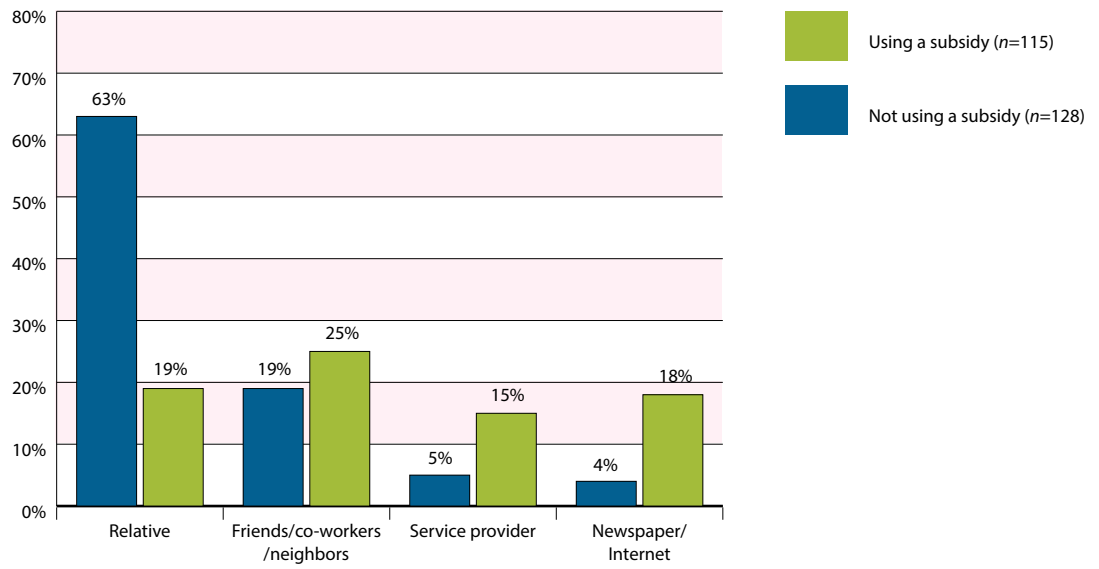


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Parents' source for learning about the care arrangement they chose for their child also varied depending upon whether the child's care was subsidized or not. Whereas the majority of parents not receiving a subsidy first heard about their primary child care arrangement from a relative (63%), parents whose child's care was subsidized relied on a variety of sources (see Figure 2 for details).

<sup>2</sup>Note: Parents could select more than one source of information.

FIGURE 2: How parents first learned about their child care arrangement by subsidy use



### How long do parents take in choosing a child care provider?

Parents in this study tended to choose a child care arrangement for their child quickly. Among parents who reported using some type of non-parental care for their child, 45% made their decisions in one week or less, 11% made their decisions in two weeks, and 22% spent three to four weeks deciding. The remainder of parents spent longer than one month making their decision (22%). The duration of the child care decision-making process did not vary by the age of the child, household income, or subsidy status.

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

Just over half of parents (51%) reported only seriously considering one child care option for their child. Of those parents that said they did not seriously consider other child care options, 57% perceived that they did not have other realistic care options to consider. There were no significant differences in whether parents considered other options by child's age, household income, or whether or not the child's care was subsidized.

Among parents who did consider other options, on average, parents considered about three options. The majority of these parents (79%) reported both calling and visiting programs under consideration. Additionally, the majority of parents (71%) who did seriously consider other options considered at least one child care center. Of those that considered multiple options, 77% of parents with an infant, 84% percent of parents of a toddler, 58% of parents of preschoolers, and 50% of parents of school-age children considered a child care center as an option. The number of options considered did not vary by child age, household income, or whether the child's care was subsidized.

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

Just under half of parents rated the process of selecting a child care arrangement difficult. Nearly one-third (31%) indicated that the process was somewhat difficult and 14% indicated that the process was very difficult. The majority of parents (56%) rated the process of finding a child care arrangement as somewhat or very easy. Child age, household income, and child care subsidy status were not related to how easy or difficult parents found the child care decision-making process.

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

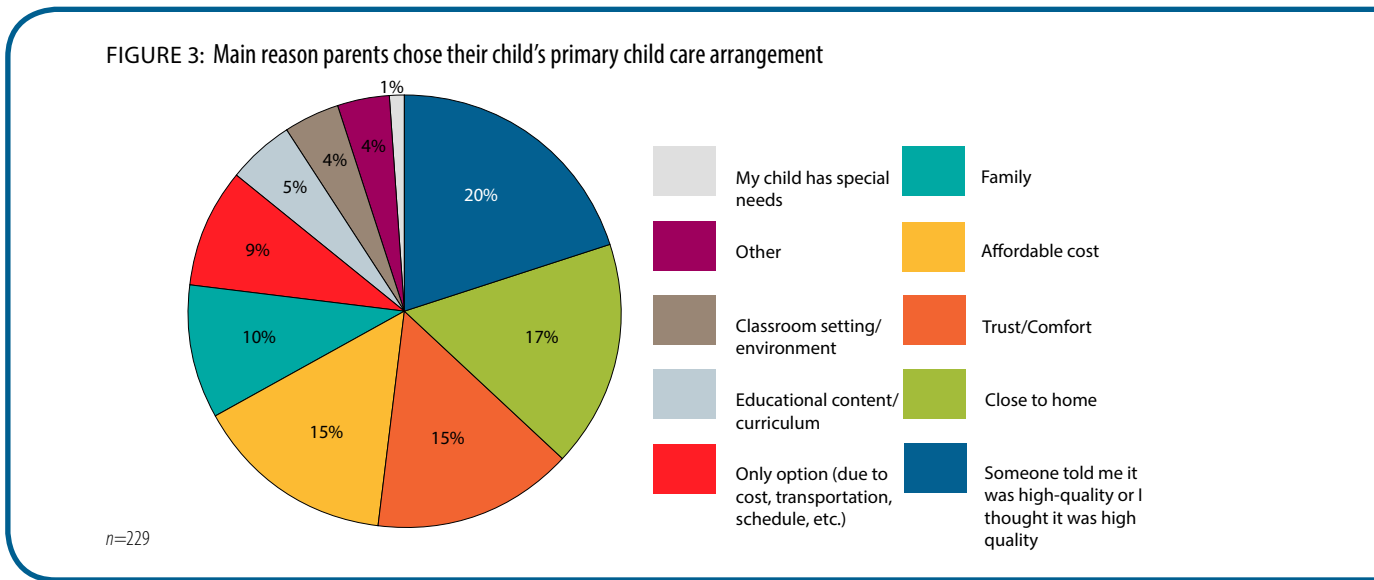
**Child Care Assistance.** Both parents whose child's care was subsidized and parents whose child's care was not subsidized were asked about the role child care assistance in influencing (or having the potential to influence) their child care decisions. Overall, one-third of parents reported that the availability of child care assistance, or a subsidy from the county, affected their selection for their child's primary arrangement. There were no differences in whether parents perceived subsidies to influence their child care decisions by child age, household income, or whether the focal child's care was subsidized.

**Multiple Children in the Household.** Among parents with multiple children, one-quarter reported that arranging care for other children in their family influenced their selection of the focal child's primary arrangement. This finding was consistent regardless of the age of the focal child, household income, or whether the focal child's care was subsidized.

**Children's Special Needs.** Less than one-tenth of the parents (7%) reported that their child was limited in any activities because of an impairment or health problem. Of these parents, half (50%) reported that they considered this limitation in choosing a child care arrangement.

### What are parents' priorities in selecting child care arrangements?

When asked for the main reason parents selected their child's primary care arrangement, 20% of parents cited quality.<sup>3</sup> Parents also cited convenient location (close to home; 17%), affordable cost (16%), trust and comfort with the caregiver (15%), and the use of relative care (10%) as top priorities in selecting their child's care arrangement. Other cited reasons are featured in Figure 3.

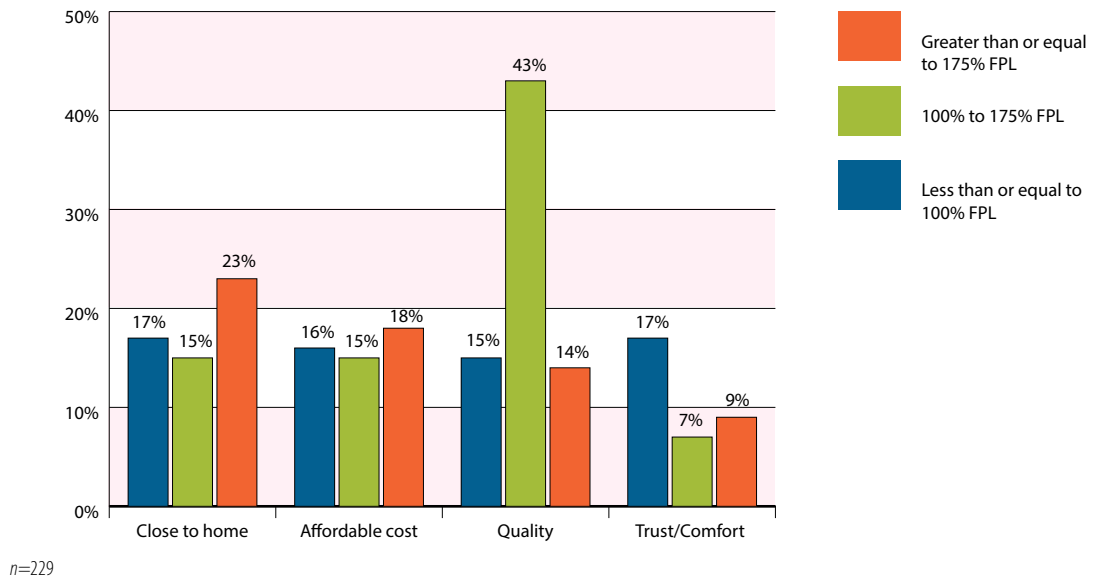


### What factors are related to parents' priorities in selecting child care arrangements?

Parents' priorities for selecting their child's primary care arrangement did not vary significantly by child age, but they did vary by household income and subsidy receipt. Parents in all income groups cited location, cost, and quality as top priorities, though parents with a household income between 100% and 175% poverty were most likely to cite quality as their primary priority in selecting child care. Other differences by household income are shown in Figure 4.

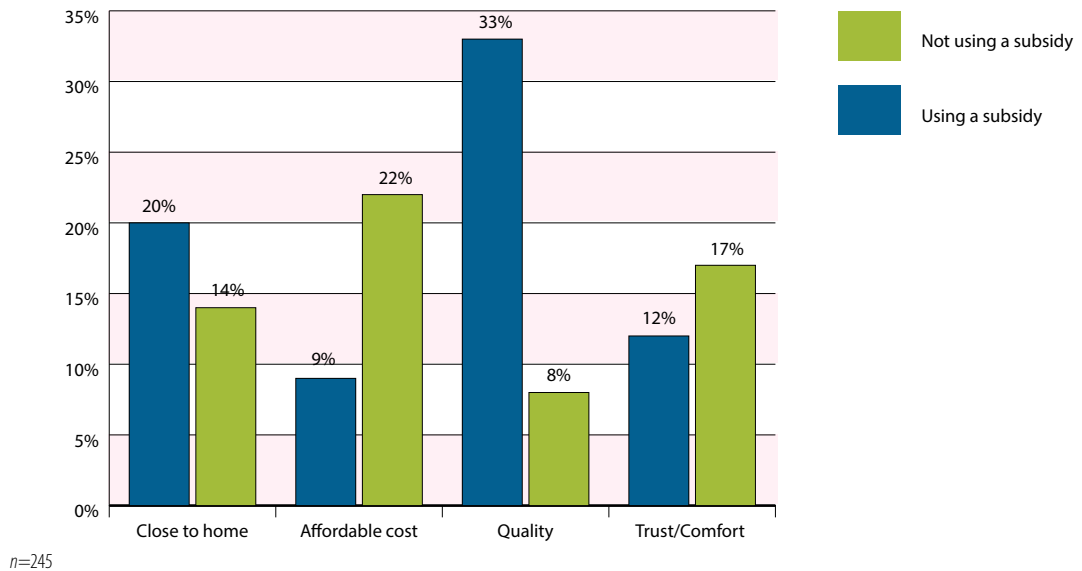
<sup>3</sup> Interviewers coded parents as selecting a care arrangement based on quality if they made a statement that fit into the following response option: "Someone told me it was a high-quality program or I thought it was high quality."

FIGURE 4: Top reasons for selecting primary care arrangement by household income



Two differences in comparing the priorities of parents whose child’s care was and was not subsidized are related to quality and cost. Among all parents using a subsidy (Figure 5), the greatest proportion selected their child’s primary care arrangement based on program quality (33%), and only 9% of parents using a child care subsidy cited cost as a top priority for selecting a care arrangement.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, less than 10% of parents not using a subsidy cited quality as important and 22% cited cost as their primary priority in selecting a care arrangement.<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE 5: Top reasons for selecting primary care arrangement by subsidy status



<sup>4</sup> The remaining 25% of the subsidized sample were distributed among the following priorities: only option, child has special needs, education, environment, family, and other.

<sup>5</sup> Other top priorities among parents not using a child care subsidy included the provider being a relative (15%) and location (14%). Less than one-tenth of parents not using a subsidy (8%) cited quality as a top priority in selecting a care arrangement.

## CHILD CARE CHOICES

### What types of child care do children use?

The primary care arrangements of children in our sample varied, with the majority being in center or informal care arrangements. Thirty-seven percent of children were cared for in a center-based setting (including pre-kindergarten and Head Start; see Figure 4). Slightly more children in the sample were cared for by a family member, friend, or neighbor (40%). Of the children in family, friend, or neighbor care, almost three quarters (72%) were cared for in the child's home, with the other 28% being cared for in another home. Fewer children in the sample were cared for in licensed or professional family child care (7%) or before or after school or summer programs (1%). Finally, a small proportion of children in our sample (15%) were not in any non-parental care arrangements.

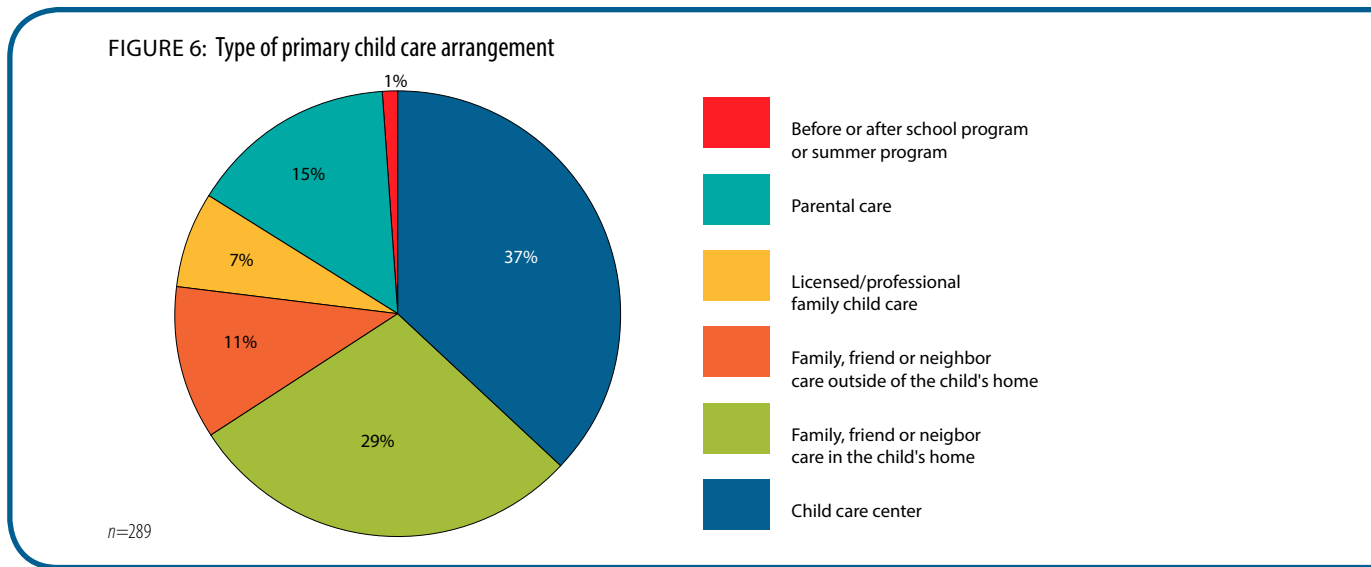
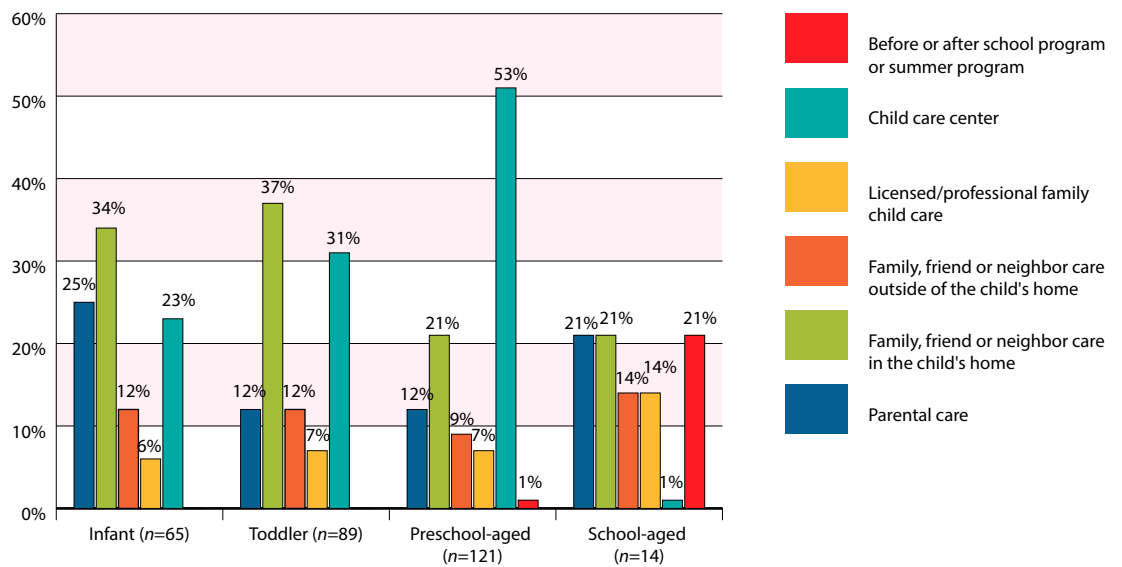


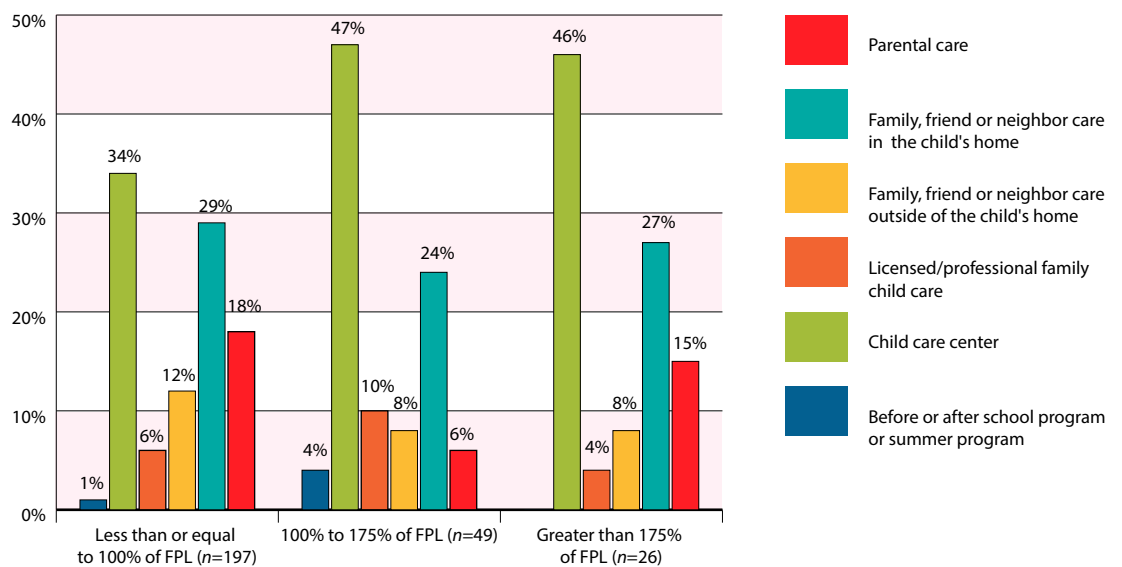
Figure 7 shows the differences in use of parental care only and non-parental primary care arrangements by child age. As would be expected based on results from national studies, the greatest proportion of infants are in parental care only (25%) or home-based informal arrangements (provided by friends, family members, or neighbors; 46%). Consistent with previous literature, compared to infants, fewer toddlers are in parental care only (12%) and more are in center care (31%). Similar to infants, a large proportion of toddlers (49%) are cared for in home settings by informal providers. About half of preschoolers (51%) were in a center-based setting, which includes Head Start and pre-kindergarten. However, a relatively high percentage (42%) was cared for solely by parents or informal providers in home-based settings. Finally, a small proportion of the sample ( $n=14$ ) were in school-age care. In interpreting these and other findings related to type of care, it should be noted that the survey question related to children's primary care arrangement asked about where they were cared for in the two weeks prior to the survey. Thus, it may be that children were cared for in other primary care arrangements at another time during the year.

FIGURE 7: Type of primary child care arrangement by child's age



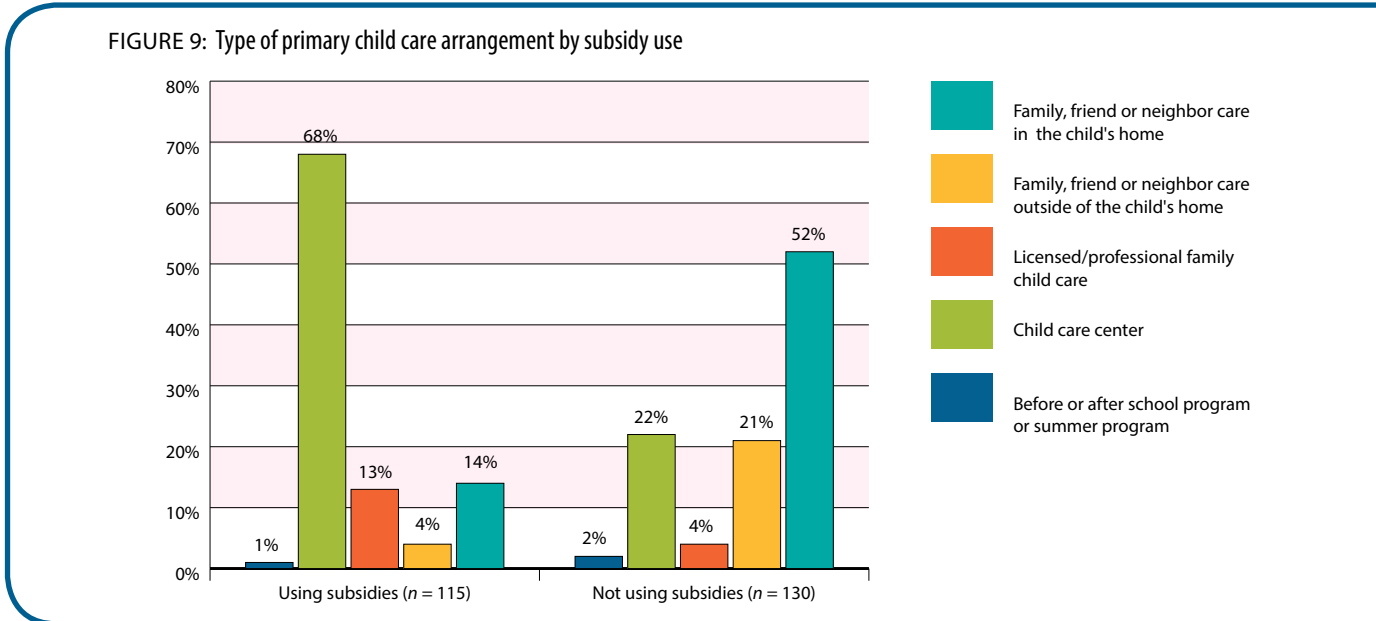
Primary care arrangements did not significantly differ by household income level (Figure 8). Just under half of parents with household incomes between 100% and 175% of FPL (47%) and 175% of the FPL or higher (46%) used child care centers for their child's primary care arrangement. Only about one-third of parents with a household income at or below 100% FPL used center care (34%). Eighteen percent of parents whose household income was below the FPL used parental care. Six percent of parents with household incomes between 100-175% FPL and 15% with household incomes above 175% FPL used parental care.

FIGURE 8: Type of primary child care arrangement by household income level





Primary care arrangements did differ among parents using subsidized and unsubsidized care for their children (Figure 9).<sup>6</sup> The most prominent differences were the proportions of children in center-based care and home-based care. Whereas the majority of children in a subsidized arrangement (68%) were cared for in a center-based arrangement, among children not in subsidized care, just over half (52%) of the children were cared for by family, friends, or neighbors in the child’s home.

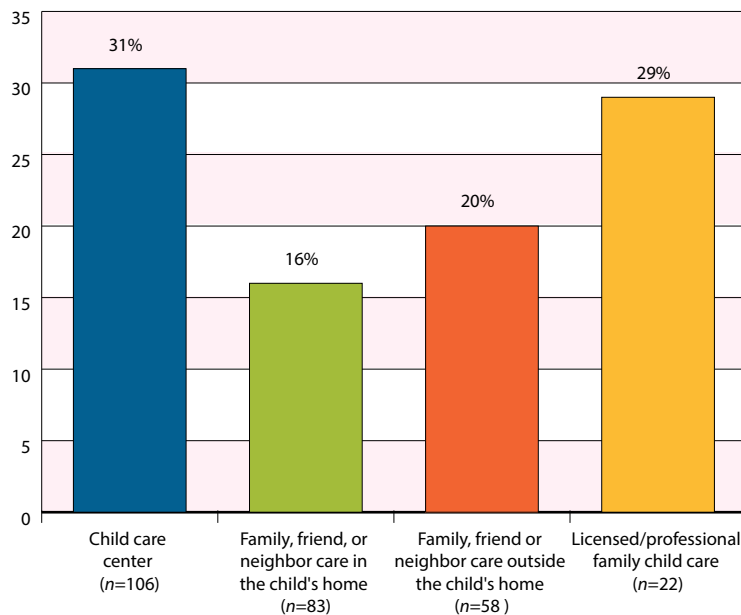


### How many hours per week are children cared for in different primary arrangements?

On average, children in the sample spent 25 hours per week in child care, though this varied somewhat by type of care (Figure 10). Children whose primary care arrangement was in a center-based arrangement spent the longest hours in care—an average of 31 hours per week. Those who were primarily cared for in family, friend, or neighbor care spent between 16 hours per week in care (when care was provided in the child’s home) and 20 hours per week in care (when care was provided outside the child’s home). Those mainly cared for in licensed or professional family child care spent an average of 29 hours per week.

<sup>6</sup> These analyses excluded families using parental care only.

FIGURE 10: Hours per week of care in primary arrangement



### What percent of children are in multiple child care arrangements, and how many total hours do children spend in multiple arrangements?

One quarter of the children were in multiple care arrangements. Of those in multiple care arrangements, the following three were the most frequent combinations: 1) family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home and outside the child's home (28%); 2) center-based care combined with family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home (28%); and 3) center-based care combined with family, friend, or neighbor care outside the child's home (24%).

Children who received care in family, friend, or neighbor care both in and outside the child's home spent an average of 33 hours per week in either type of care. Those cared for in a combination of center-based care and family, friend, or neighbor care in the child's home were in care for an average of 40 hours per week, and those cared for in both center-based care and family, friend, or neighbor care outside of the child's home were in care an average of 36 hours per weeks.

### NEW QUESTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

This Brief provides useful information on child care decision-making processes, parents' priorities in selecting care arrangements, and the child care arrangements used by TCA applicants with young children in Maryland. Findings from this Brief highlight challenges state administrators face in supporting parents to select high quality care, such as the lack of affordable/accessible options for parents, the quick time frame in which parents make child care choices, and parents' reliance on informal information sources. Future research, using data from the Maryland Child Care Choices study, can explore how parents' priorities, child care decision-making process, and choices change over time. Additionally, through the use of more complex statistical methods, these data can be used to gain a better understanding of the associations between child care decision-making, priorities, and choices, taking into account demographic characteristics of families and state policies.