

Many families with infants and toddlers struggle to consistently access child care

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We asked parents of infants and toddlers (birth to age 3) to tell us about their child care experiences and preferences. Using responses from parents of infants or toddlers who participated in national RAPID household surveys in January 2024 and November 2024, we aim to understand the types of child care that families with infants and toddlers use and what is most important to parents when selecting child care.

Children's earliest years are a critical period when the foundation is built for lifelong physical health and emotional well-being. Research shows that consistent, responsive caregiving is conducive to healthy development during these early years.



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“Sometimes it is difficult to find relatives/friends who I trust and are available as sometimes their plans change.” Parent in Wisconsin

“I’m relying on family and things arise that make them unable to help. I have looked into center-based care and considered going back to work, but it will cost me more for child care than I can make in income to pay for it.” Parent in Ohio

“I use babysitters, mostly teenagers, so their schedules are sometimes unreliable. They do their best, but they have other commitments, too. They also can’t always work during the day, which is when I need them.” Parent in Texas

Family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care is the most common child care choice for families with infants and toddlers

We asked parents of infants and toddlers questions about how much child care they use, as well as their experiences using center-based care, home-based care, and both paid and unpaid family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) care.

More than two in three (68%) parents of infants and toddlers use child care for five hours or more per week. Among these families, and consistent with other national data, FFN care makes up the largest share of providers of infants and toddlers.

Responses from the survey show that, on a weekly basis:

- 32% of parents use center-based care
- 26% of parents use unpaid FFN care
- 13% of parents use paid FFN care
- 12% of parents use home-based care in the child care provider’s residence

“In a rural area, child care is very hard to find, and rates are not competitive because they don’t have to be.”
Parent in Montana

Reliable access to child care is a particular concern for many parents of infants and toddlers

The predictable schedules and routines that are associated with stable access to child care support the positive well-being and development of children, families, and caregivers.

“I had challenges finding other part-time care closer to where we live so I drive one hour twice a week for part-time care.” Parent in Louisiana

In their responses to open-ended questions, parents of infants and toddlers spoke about the different challenges they experience securing child care, including issues with affordability, hours, location, and trust in their provider.

“We had to contact this provider very early on. I was maybe five or six weeks pregnant. And she happened to have a spot. If we had waited much longer, we wouldn’t have gotten in.”
Parent in South Carolina

As indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet, parents mentioned concerns about providers meeting the specific and intensive caregiving needs of infants and toddlers, while at the same time families navigate high costs, low availability, and inconsistent schedules. Additionally, many parents, and particularly those living in rural areas, noted the limited child care options near their home or work.

This points to the barriers to reliable child care access that families with infants and toddlers face, and these data can inform policies and programs that support families in meeting this critical need.

“I am currently using backup care days offered by my employer as our primary form of child care for our younger child. In March, I will run out of days to use, and we are struggling to find an affordable option nearby that has availability when we need it.”

Parent in Virginia

“Finding a trustworthy and experienced caregiver who could handle our infant’s specific needs was a major concern.”

Parent in New York

“Ensuring the caregiver has the necessary experience and qualifications to care for an infant adds another layer of difficulty.”

Parent in Iowa

Trust in their child care provider is the most important thing to families with infants and toddlers

To understand families’ child care needs, we asked parents what factor matters the most when selecting child care for their infants and toddlers. We provided a list of factors to choose from for each type of child care used.

Across all types of child care, parents of infants and toddlers are most likely to say that trust and/or comfortability with their provider is the top factor when they select child care for their family. Parents are significantly more likely to endorse trust and/or comfortability with their provider than any other factor, including affordability, availability, location, or the hours the provider is available.

Factors for selecting child care, in order of frequency endorsed by parents of infants and toddlers:

1. Trust and/or comfortability
2. Affordability
3. Availability
4. Location
5. Hours

Conclusion

Predictable and nurturing caregiving contributes to positive early childhood development, and more work is needed to support families with infants and toddlers looking for child care. RAPID data show that there is an unmet need among families with infants and toddlers for reliable, affordable, and trusted sources of child care, and that families are using a patchwork of child care arrangements to find trusted sources of care for their infants and toddlers that they can afford and rely on.

Parents themselves are experts in selecting the sources and settings of child care that will best support their family and foster their child's development, and they are placing an emphasis on selecting providers that their family trusts and feels comfortable with. These findings can inform policies and programs that address parents' child care concerns and experiences so they are better supported in providing the healthy, responsive caregiving that is essential to their young children's development.

About the RAPID Survey Project

The RAPID Survey Project is based in the Stanford Center on Early Childhood, under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center.

This set of analyses is based on 700 responses from parents of infants or toddlers who participated in national RAPID household surveys in January 2024 and November 2024. These parents represent a range of voices: 9% are Black, 16.1% are Latinx, and 29% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not out of the total sample size. The data for these analyses are not weighted.

↑
22,000+
Parents

↑
12,000+
Providers

↑
50
U.S. States