

Perspectives from Washington State Parents: Preferences for Early Care and Education

The teachers treat my kids as if they are their very own, and the quality of the care my kids receive from them is just phenomenal.—Parent from Fort Lewis



In February and March 2008, parents of children ages 0 through 5 were surveyed by phone about their priorities, experiences, and preferences in helping their child learn, grow, and realize his or her full potential. Parents from a statewide randomly selected sample were asked whether their child is regularly cared for by someone other than a parent or guardian and, if so, the type of care used, their experiences with that care arrangement, and their perceptions regarding program quality and learning goals.

Parents choose a variety of care arrangements to meet their needs. Parents of half of Washington State children under age 6 report that their child is not regularly cared for by anyone other than the child's parent or guardian. Of the remaining half of children in nonparental care, 30% attend center-based care or preschool programs; 15% are cared for informally by a relative, neighbor, or friend; and 5% use small child care programs located in family homes. The type of child care that families use differs with their child's age: younger children more often receive parental or informal care, and older children are more often in center-based care.

Most parents have access to programs that meet their needs. Approximately three-quarters of families are able to find care for their child that meets their needs most of the time. However, almost one in four families have experienced difficulty in finding the child care they need.

Parents receive support from their early care and education (ECE) providers. Most parents (93%) report that their ECE provider makes them feel comfortable when they visit or observe. More than three-quarters of parents have talked with their child's care provider or preschool teacher about how to help their child learn and grow. Nearly one-third of parents report that their child's care provider or preschool teacher lets them know about relevant services in the community. However, information about community services is provided more often to the parents of older children, Spanish-speaking families, and families living at or below the federal poverty level than to other parents.

Parents pay attention to the quality of early learning programs. Having a clean and safe environment is very important to 97% of parents in choosing and keeping their child care arrangement, as is how a provider talks and plays with the child. The provider's experience and training, the learning activities and materials children use, and how children get along with each other are very important to more than 80% of parents.

Parents of children ages 3 through 5 rate preschool learning goals as very important. Parents most often cite skills related to emotional well-being and social competence as very important for their children to learn in preschool. Other highly rated goals include approaches to learning (persisting at tasks), cognition and general knowledge (being interested in books and learning the alphabet, colors, and numbers), and communicative skills (following directions).