

Searching for Child Care in the Wake of the Pandemic

Experiences of Parents in the District of Columbia

Catherine Kuhns, Heather Sandstrom, Soumita Bose, Ellie Lauderback, and Michelle Casas

KEY FINDINGS

Parents were evenly split on the ease of searching for child care, with **nearly half of surveyed parents reporting a somewhat or very easy time finding child care.**

Parents had difficulty finding care that had **open slots (48 percent)**, was **affordable (45 percent)**, and was **available during the hours they needed (35 percent).**

Parents who received subsidies generally had an easier time searching for care than those who did not receive subsidies.

Several parents shared that providers' **lack of responsiveness and transparency regarding waiting lists and availability of slots** made it hard to arrange child care.

Infant care slots were harder to find, and **parents of infants were more likely to report difficulty finding affordable care** than parents of older children.

In focus groups, parents explained that **it is hard to find programs that "check all the boxes"** in terms of cost, location, quality, schedule, and other factors important to them.

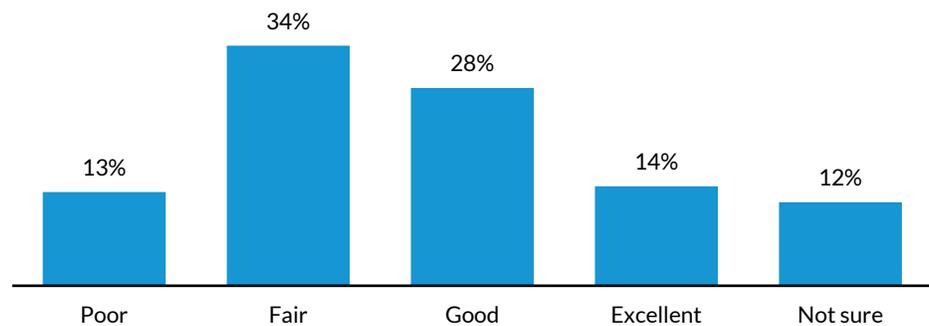
Searching for child care is a common practice among parents of young children, yet it can often be a complex and difficult process. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many child care providers in the District of Columbia to temporarily close—and some shut down permanently. In the two years to follow, parents looking for child care faced unusual circumstances, as many programs operated with reduced hours, limited enrollment capacity, and safety protocols that prohibited in-person tours.

In spring 2022, we surveyed 137 DC residents who had newly enrolled a child in a licensed DC child care program. These parents shared their experiences searching for care and making child care decisions in the wake of the pandemic. We held focus groups with a subsample of 39 parents in fall 2022 to probe on specific survey findings around the difficulty of the search process. In this fact sheet, we present findings from both the survey and focus groups with parents.

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD CARE SUPPLY IN THE DISTRICT

The survey asked respondents to rate the overall supply of child care in DC on a scale of poor to excellent (figure 1). Most parents gave a rating of fair or good. When asked whether they felt there are "good choices" for child care and early education near their home, the majority (65 percent) said "yes," though 22 percent disagreed and 13 percent said "I don't know." A smaller share of parents in wards 6, 7, and 8 said they had "good choices" (60, 52, and 50 percent, respectively) while rates in other wards were higher than the average (though sample sizes are small).

FIGURE 1
Parents' Ratings of DC's Overall Child Care Supply



Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey (N = 137).

PARENTS' SEARCH EXPERIENCES VARIED WIDELY

Surveyed parents were economically and racially diverse and distributed across DC's eight wards. Differences in family circumstances and local neighborhood context contributed to differences in their child care search experiences. Some parents took longer to find a child care program than others: 30 percent reported it took a week or less while 10 percent reported it took more than three months. For the majority of parents (56 percent), this was not their first time searching for care. Overall, parents were evenly split on the ease of searching for child care: 28 percent rated it "very easy," 21 percent rated it "somewhat easy," 7 percent rated it "neither easy nor hard," 25 percent rated it "somewhat hard," and 20 percent rated it "very hard."

Parents generally reported having an easier time finding child care if their focal child had an older sibling (48 percent of the sample). Across child age groups, roughly 20 percent of parents reported the experience was "very hard," but a larger share of parents with toddlers reported the process was very or somewhat easy compared with parents of preschoolers and infants. Black and Latino parents also generally reported having an easier time finding care than white parents.

Overall, surveyed parents who received subsidy vouchers reported having an easier time searching for care than parents who did not receive a subsidy. Subsidy recipients were more likely than nonrecipients to describe the process of finding child care as "very easy" (45 and 16 percent, respectively) and less likely to describe it as "somewhat" or "very hard" (29 and 56 percent, respectively). Nonrecipients were nearly five times as likely to report having difficulty finding care that was affordable (65 versus 14 percent). However, in focus groups, some subsidy recipients detailed challenges they faced obtaining a voucher and finding a provider that both accepts vouchers and meets their expectations for quality.

Challenges presented by COVID-19, including staffing shortages and reduced care hours, made the search process more difficult for some parents. Parents also expressed a general concern for health and safety and questions about masking and vaccination requirements. Data from the focus groups echo these concerns, with many parents citing difficulty finding a facility that was open during the hours they needed care, making it hard to work or attend school.

Some parents shared that a lack of responsiveness and transparency created difficulties in their search for child care. One parent shared, "I found that it was a nightmare when I was first trying to find anything. I had applied to a daycare center when I was 3 months pregnant ...after she was born, I was scrambling to find a place, and I was throwing money around on deposits...finding out that waiting lists are not real...It took a long time. It was both stressful and expensive."

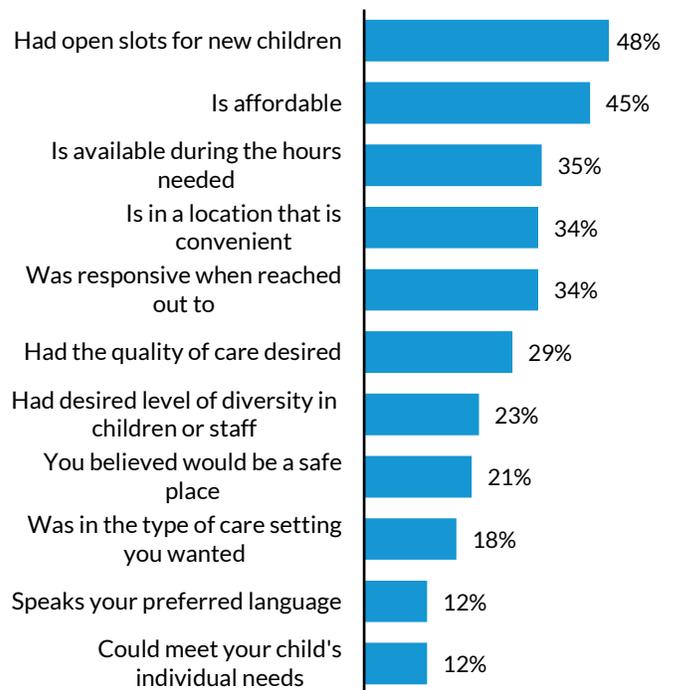
However, some parents had an easier time finding care. One parent shared, "(I) didn't have any problem, because my daycare is family owned, so it was just a simple process for me...it's my aunt and grandmother who run the business—made it very easy to transition him to day care. He may not be in day care, to be honest, if it wasn't for her day care center."

Another parent shared, "It was easy...because I'm on TANF, so they give us resources and places to look."

FIGURE 2

Areas of Difficulty Finding Child Care

Did you have any difficulty finding child care that...



Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey (N = 137).

URBAN INSTITUTE