



RESEARCH REPORT

What Were Parents' Experiences Searching for Child Care in the Wake of the Pandemic?

Findings from a Survey of Parents in the District of Columbia

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Executive Summary

This report presents descriptive findings from a telephone survey of 137 parents in the District of Columbia using licensed child care for a child younger than age 6 in spring 2022. We recruited parents across DC's eight wards who had newly enrolled their child in a licensed child care program so we could ask them about their experiences looking for and selecting a child care provider in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We administered a 30-minute computer-assisted interview in either English or Spanish, which included mostly close-ended survey questions but also several open-ended questions to which parents could describe their thoughts and experiences in greater detail. Their responses reflect differences in families' experiences based on their community context and resources, and their background and familiarity with the DC child care market. Key survey findings are described below.

Child Care Search Experiences

- Before their search for their currently enrolled child, 44 percent of surveyed parents and guardians had never searched for child care for any child, whereas others had some prior experience.
- To help them find a child care provider, parents most commonly used Google or other search engines (74 percent), asked friends or neighbors with children (69 percent), or walked or drove around their neighborhoods to find programs nearby (53 percent). Also, 38 percent reported using the My Child Care DC search website maintained by the District, which allows users to search profiles of all licensed child care programs and view an interactive map.
- More than half of surveyed parents (58 percent) considered more than one provider during their search, whereas the other 42 percent considered only one.
 - » Parents were more likely to report that they considered only one provider if they had an older child, because many wanted to use the same program as they did for the older child.
 - » Parents receiving a child care subsidy to help them pay for care were more likely than parents not receiving a subsidy to consider only one provider, meaning they knew who they wanted to provide care or they did not conduct an extensive search.
- For most parents (67 percent), it was crucial that their child care costs were within their budget. Parents were just as concerned about the program's curriculum (69 percent noted that this was crucial).

- Top reasons participants reported for choosing their current provider included the location (29 percent) followed by the perceived quality of care (26 percent) and that it “gave me the best feeling” (16 percent).

Challenges during the Search Process

- 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 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 a subsidy:
 - » Subsidy recipients (45 percent) were more likely than nonrecipients (16 percent) to describe the process of finding child care as very easy.
 - » Nonrecipients (65 percent) were more likely to report that they had difficulty finding care that was affordable compared with subsidy recipients (14 percent).
- Several people shared that a lack of communication and transparency created difficulties in their search for child care. They reported not hearing back from child care providers in general (specifically, about waiting lists) and long wait times for providers to return calls.

Perceptions of DC’s Child Care Supply

- There was wide variation across parents’ perceptions of the overall supply of child care in DC. Parents most commonly rated the supply “fair” (38 percent), followed by “good” (31 percent), “excellent” (16 percent), and “poor” (15 percent).
- When asked if they have good child care options near their home, the majority of parents (64 percent) said “yes,” but 22 percent said “no” and 14 percent said “I don’t know,” suggesting variation in families’ access to child care programs that meet their needs.
- Virtual focus groups with a subset of survey respondents will shed light on the differences in parents’ search behaviors and experiences during the pandemic recovery period.

What Were Parents' Experiences Searching for Child Care in the Wake of the Pandemic?

Parents routinely make decisions about child care, but finding and selecting a provider can be complex (Weber 2011). To support parents looking for and selecting a child care provider, the District of Columbia has implemented several strategies, including revamping their child care search website, My Child Care DC, investing heavily in their new quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) called Capital Quality, and strengthening the capacity of their child care resource and referral agency, DC Child Care Connections. The District, like many states, has also launched efforts to expand the supply of child care programs and care slots to better meet families' needs. Lack of care supply, particularly for infants (Reinvestment Fund 2018) and during nontraditional hours (Adams et al. 2021; Sandstrom et al. 2018), has been problematic in recent years, motivating the District to consider ways to improve access and affordability of care.

As part of the DC Child Care Policy Research Partnership Study, formally titled "Access to a Supply of Quality Care in the District of Columbia" (or Project ASQC, "Ask"), the Urban Institute in partnership with DC's Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has examined features of child care supply and the perspectives of child care providers, early educators, and parents on efforts to improve access and quality. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit DC in 2020, forcing many child care facilities to close temporarily and some even permanently, Project ASQC leveraged the opportunity to examine parents' experiences searching for care and making child care decisions. We posed the following questions:

1. What are parents' experiences looking for child care? What sources of information do they use? How long does it take to find care? How easy or difficult is the process?
2. What factors are most important to parents as they look for and select a provider?
3. How do parents rate their provider's quality?
4. What are parents' perceptions of local care supply? Do parents feel they have good choices?

We fielded the survey in March through July 2022, recruiting parents who had newly enrolled a child in a licensed child care program in DC. We identified parents eligible for the survey through their child care providers. We asked providers to share flyers about the study with families who had enrolled since the 2021–22 academic year began (i.e., August or September 2021). By targeting new enrollees,

we were able to ask survey respondents about their experiences looking for and selecting a child care provider in the past year. Box 1 describes the survey sample. For more details on the survey methods and sample, see the technical report by Sandstrom and colleagues (2022).

The survey asked parents questions related to the ease of accessing information about child care options, experiences searching for and selecting care, perceptions of local care supply and the availability of high-quality child care, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and perceptions regarding how the child care provider they use does or does not support their child’s growth and development. Respondents also reported on their knowledge and use of the My Child Care DC website and their knowledge of Capital Quality and use of quality designations in their search for and selection of a child care provider. We offered them a \$50 Visa gift card as a thank-you gift.

BOX 1

Description of the Survey Sample

Although we did not draw a random sample, our recruitment approach generated a diverse sample of 137 participants, with a significant share of families with low incomes that receive a child care subsidy.

- Our sample includes families from all eight District wards.
- The children of the parents we surveyed are racially and ethnically comparable with the overall racial and ethnic diversity of children in DC.^a
- The survey was administered in Spanish to 13 of the 137 participants (about 9 percent).
- Parents across all education levels and income levels were surveyed, capturing the economic diversity in the District. Education levels closely mirror published estimates of educational attainment for DC adults.^b
- The median household income of surveyed parents was \$65,000—much lower than the overall median household income of DC families with children (\$105,010 in 2020).^c
- Nearly 41 percent of parents in the sample were receiving a child care subsidy at the time of the survey.
- The majority (93 percent) were using center-based care, and about 7 percent were using a licensed child development home or expanded home at the time of the survey.
- Most parents used child care during traditional hours on weekdays. No survey respondent used licensed child care on the weekends. About 8 percent dropped off their children before 7:30 a.m. on weekdays, and 10 percent picked up their children after 5:30 p.m.^d

^a“Child Population by Race and Age Group in District of Columbia, 2020, Age Group 0–4,” Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, updated September 2021, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/8446-child-population-by-race-and-age-group?loc=10&loct=3#detailed/3/any/false/574/68,69,67,12,70,66,71,13|62/17078>.

^b Richard Florida, "Where Do College Grads Live? The Top and Bottom U.S. Cities," *Bloomberg*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-08-23/ranking-america-s-most-educated-cities>.

^c "Median income of families with children by ward in District of Columbia, 2020," Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center, updated March 2022, <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/6749-median-income-of-families-with-children-by-ward#detailed/3/any/false/574/any/13835>.

^d Because of staffing shortages, some DC child care facilities modified their hours and opened later and/or closed earlier than their license permits. Therefore, the hours parents used care does not reflect the hours they needed care. The Child Care Study Act in DC defined nontraditional-hour child care as care outside the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. (see "Subchapter I-A. Child Care Study," Council of the District of Columbia, accessed November 1, 2022, <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/code/titles/7/chapters/20/subchapters/I-A>). Sample sizes for parents using nontraditional-hour child care by this definition are too small to report.

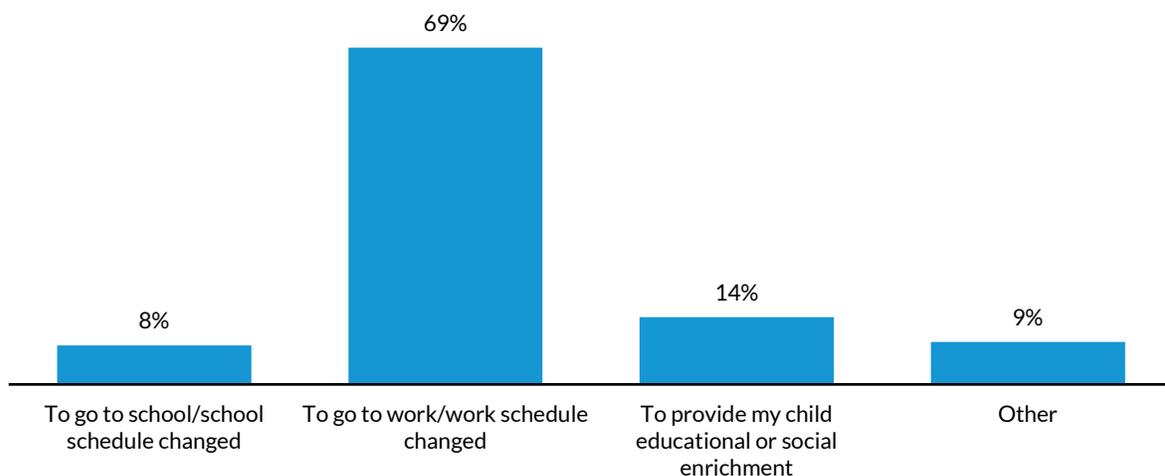
Reasons for Looking for Child Care and Past Experiences

The survey asked parents several questions about the timing and circumstances of their child care search. The majority of parents (69 percent) wanted child care so they could work, while 14 percent said the main reason they wanted care was to provide their child with educational and social enrichment. Another 8 percent of parents were prompted to look for care because they were going to school or their own school schedule had changed (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Parents Most Commonly Reported Looking for Child Care for Employment-Related Reasons

What is the main reason that you wanted child care for your child?



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents. "Other" reasons for wanting child care include "To give me some relief/time to address personal needs," "To fill in gaps left by my main provider or before/after school," "I wasn't satisfied with previous care arrangement," "I wanted to reduce child care expenses," "Our old provider stopped offering child care services," "My child was no longer eligible for previous care," "I was looking for a more convenient child care location," and "Other."

About 61 percent of parents were looking for child care for a toddler (12 to 36 months), 25 percent were looking for care for a preschooler, and 15 percent were looking for infant care for a baby younger than 12 months. Seventy-five percent of these children had never been in licensed child care in DC before (table 1). For nearly half of parents (44 percent), this was their first time ever looking for child care for any child. Although some parents brought experience gained from previous searches, often for older-sibling children, many were new to the DC child care market. About 29 percent of children were in the care of relatives, primarily grandparents (78 percent), before starting licensed child care.

TABLE 1
Previous Experience Searching for or Using Child Care

	N	%
First time looking for child care ever		
Yes	60	44%
No	77	56%
First time conducting child care search for this child		
Yes	30	39%
No	47	61%
First time using licensed child care in DC for focal child	103	75%
Used informal relative care before beginning current arrangement^a	40	29%

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size was 137.

^a Of the 137 survey respondents, 40 reported using informal care before beginning their current licensed care arrangement. Of those 40, all used a relative caregiver, versus an unrelated neighbor or friend. All but 9 of those relatives were grandparents.

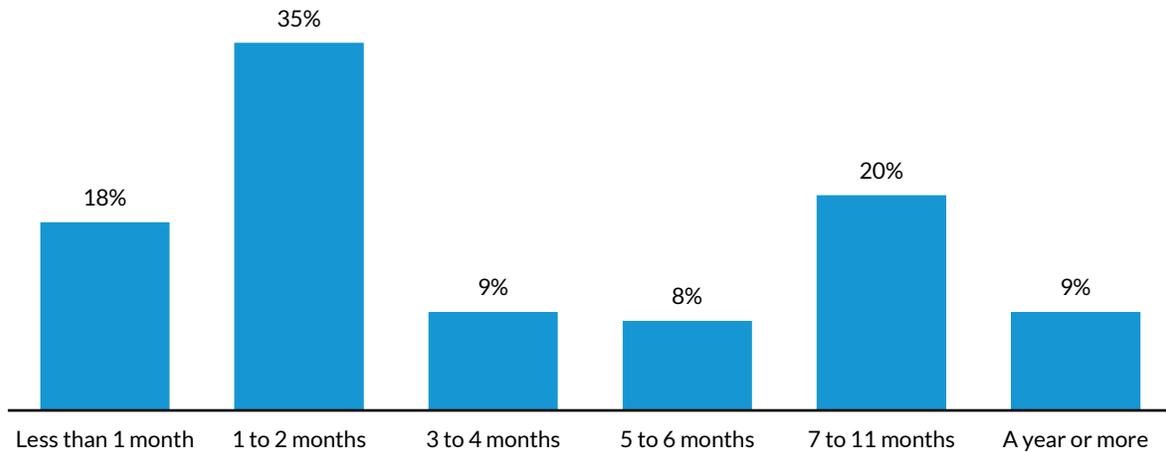
Timing of Care Search

We asked, “About how far in advance before you started care at this provider did you begin looking for care?” The most common response was about 1–2 months in advance, reported by 35 percent of parents (figure 2). Some parents started looking closer to the start date and others began looking much earlier; 20 percent began looking 7–11 months in advance and 9 percent a year or more before starting the care arrangement. Parents who had previous experience looking for child care and parents who did not receive a child care subsidy were more likely to begin looking for child care a year or more in advance (figures 3 and 4). In open-ended responses, parents mentioned knowing how hard it can be to find a slot and needing to arrange care in advance.

FIGURE 2

Parents Most Commonly Began Looking for Child Care about One to Two Months in Advance

About how far in advance before you started care at your current provider did you begin to look for care for your child?



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 118 respondents.

We were wait-listed in two facilities [during pregnancy], and then of course, we were told you can't verify a spot until you have a baby...I guess my frustration is just you bring home a newborn and one of your to-do items is to hunt down your providers where you have a waitlist and ask, "Do you have a spot? Yes or No?" So, our first choice did not have a spot. Our daughter is now six months, and they might have a spot in a month or two. That's the daycare closest to us, where she's still wait-listed, which is why we went with our next choice.

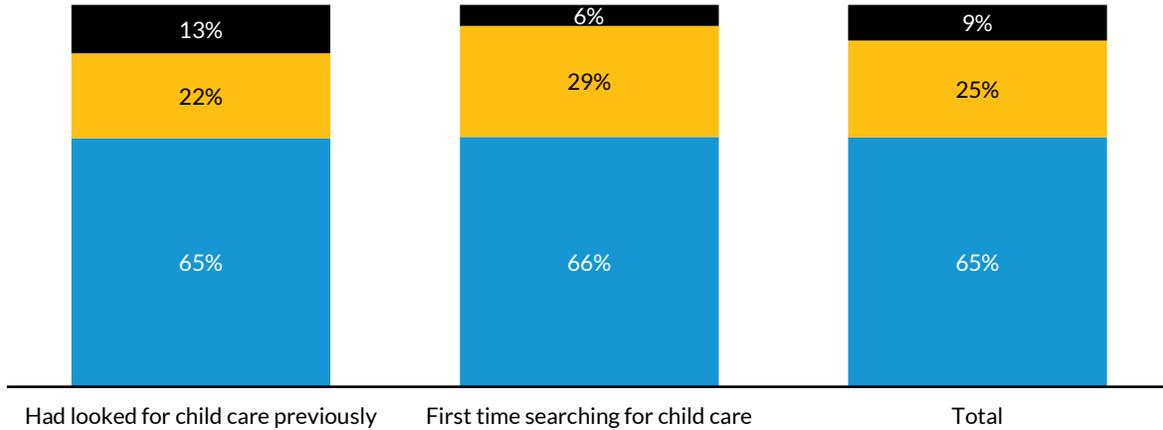
—DC parent surveyed

FIGURE 3

Parents Who Had Previous Experience Looking for Child Care Were More Likely to Begin Looking for Child Care a Year or More in Advance of Starting Their Current Arrangement

How far in advance parents began looking for child care by whether they had ever searched for child care before

■ Less than 6 months ■ 6 to 11 months ■ A year or more



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

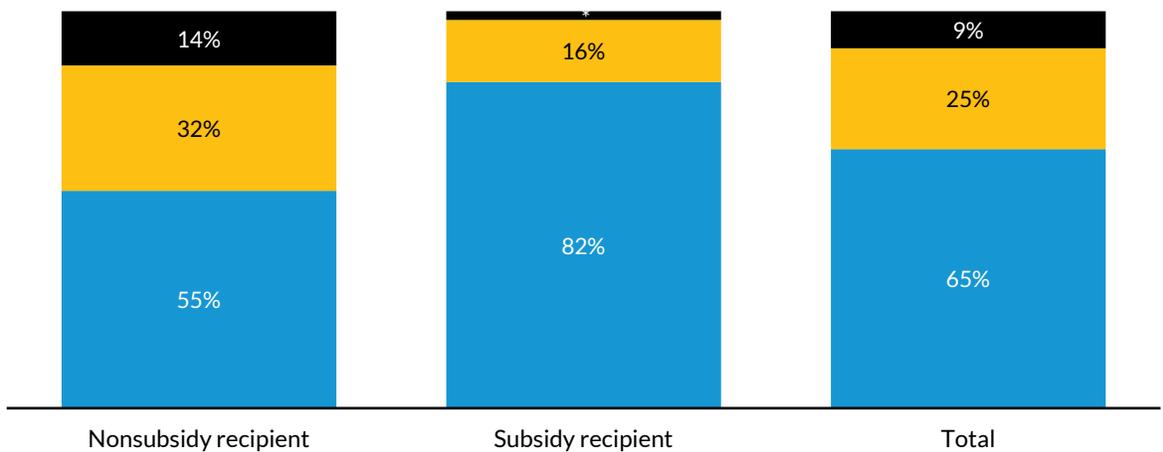
Note: The responding sample size for this item was 118 respondents.

FIGURE 4

Parents Who Do Not Receive a Subsidy Reported Starting to Look for Child Care Much Earlier Than Subsidy Recipients

About how far in advance before you started care at this provider did you begin looking for care?

■ Less than 6 months ■ 6 to 11 months ■ A year or more



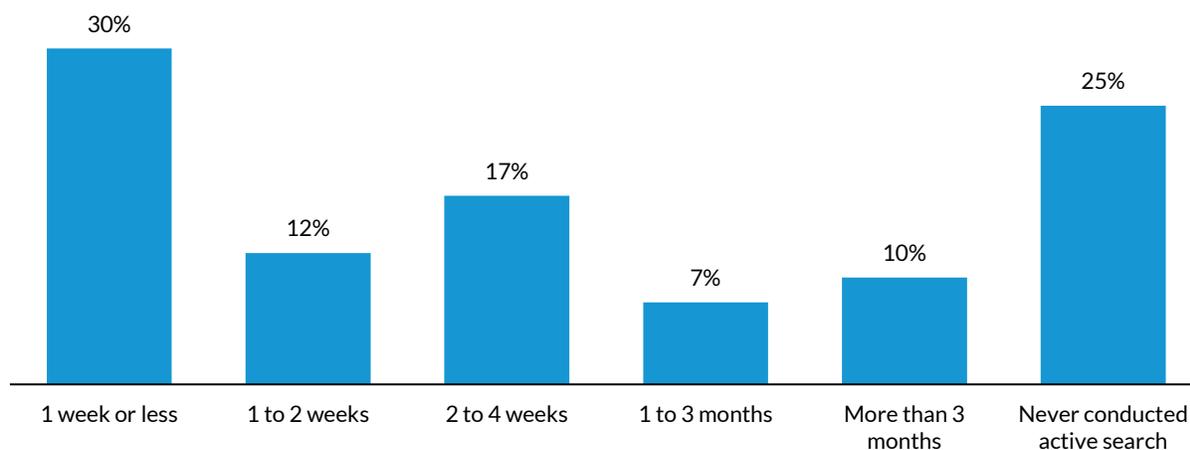
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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 118 respondents.

The survey also asked, “Once you started looking, how long did it take you to find [provider name]?” The most common response mentioned by 30 percent of parents was within one week. Others took a few weeks or even a few months to find a provider (figure 5). In our response options, we gave parents the choice “I never conducted an active search.” Previous research shows some parents know the provider they want to use and do not consider more than one provider (NSECE Project Team 2014), so we hypothesized that some parents do not actively search. Instead, they might confirm that a provider is available, but otherwise, they are not seeking out providers and would not call their experience a search. We found that 25 percent were in this category of never conducting an active search when they most recently enrolled in child care.

FIGURE 5
Some Parents Found Child Care Quickly While Others Took Several Months
Once you started looking, how long did it take you to find your current provider?



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

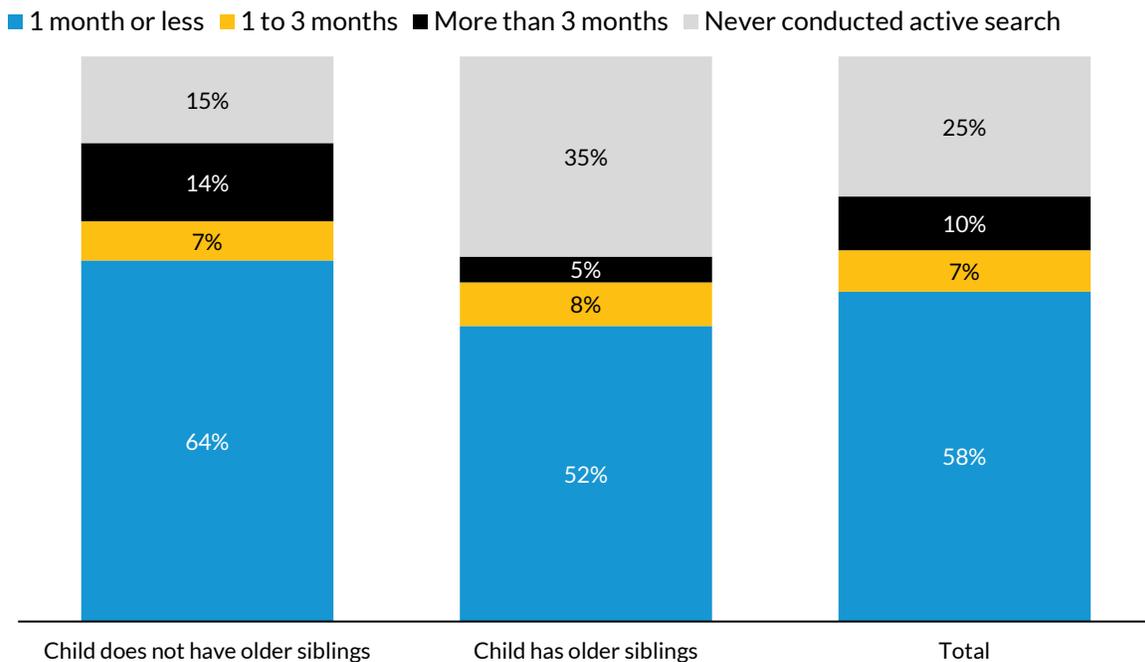
Notes: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents. Categories are mutually exclusive. Searches that lasted 0–7 days are included in “1 week or less,” whereas searches that lasted 8–14 days are included in “1 to 2 weeks.”

We further analyzed the data to see if parents who found a provider more or less quickly were different from each other. We hypothesized that we might find differences based on whether a parent had an older child, whether they had searched for or used child care before, or whether they received a child care subsidy to help them pay for care. Among various family characteristics, having an older-sibling child largely contributed to search length. We grouped search lengths into four categories: “less than one month,” “1 to 3 months,” “more than 3 months,” or “never conducted an active search.” We found that parents whose children had older siblings generally reported finding their child care provider more quickly, and a larger share never conducted an active search (35 percent compared with 15

percent of sample without older-sibling children; figure 6). Additionally, parents who received a subsidy to help them pay for child care were more likely than parents who did not receive a subsidy to report not actively searching for care, and few searched for three or more months (4 percent with a subsidy compared with 14 percent without a subsidy; figure 7).

FIGURE 6

Parents Whose Focal Children Had Older Siblings Generally Found Their Provider More Quickly
Once parents started looking, how long it took them to find their current child care provider by whether their focal child had an older sibling



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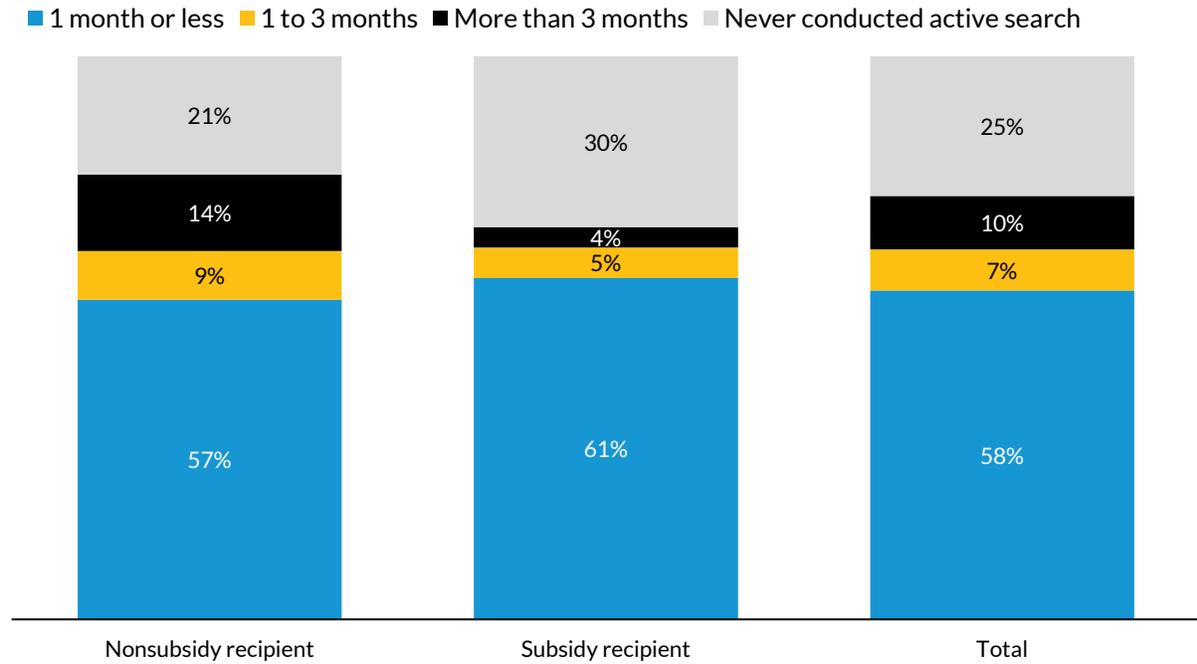
Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Notes: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents. Categories are mutually exclusive. “One month or less” includes 0 to 30 days and “1 to 3 months” includes 31 to 90 days.

FIGURE 7

Parents Who Received a Subsidy Voucher Were More Likely Than Other Parents to Not Actively Search for Care

How long it took subsidy voucher recipients to find their current child care provider compared with parents who did not receive a subsidy voucher



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Notes: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents. Categories are mutually exclusive. “One month or less” includes 0 to 30 days and “1 to 3 months” includes 31 to 90 days.

Sources of Information Used to Find Child Care

The survey asked parents about the sources of information they used to help them find child care. Parents most commonly used Google or other search engines (74 percent), friend or neighbor referrals (69 percent), or walked or drove around their neighborhoods (53 percent). Thirty-eight percent reported using the My Child Care DC website, which OSSE maintains to provide a searchable list of licensed providers in DC (table 2).

TABLE 2

Resources Used by Parents While Searching for Care

Affirmative responses to the following resources

	N	%
Used Google or any other search engine	101	73.7%
Asked friends or neighbors with children	95	69.3%
Walked or drove around my neighborhood	73	53.3%
Asked family members	52	38.0%
Searched the My Child Care DC website	52	38.0%
Asked providers I already knew	51	37.2%
Used social media	42	30.7%
Searched the Care.com website	24	17.5%
Got help from a child care subsidy or social services caseworker	23	16.8%
Posted or responded to an ad	17	12.4%
Asked a health care provider for information	16	11.7%
Called DC Child Care Connections	14	10.2%
Asked a home visitor, social worker, or caseworker providing services to me or my child	–	–
Got a referral from my church or place of worship	–	–

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Notes: The responding sample size for each item was 137 respondents. Respondents could indicate if they did or did not use each resource. Because of disclosure restrictions, data are not available for some variables as indicated by “–” for some variables.

Awareness and Use of Capital Quality Designations

The survey also asked parents whether they had heard of Capital Quality, the District’s QRIS, and if they had, whether quality designations (i.e., ratings of Developing, Progressing, Quality, and High-Quality) influenced their search for and selection of a program. Most parents (83 percent) were “not at all familiar” with Capital Quality, while 17 percent were “somewhat familiar” and had a basic understanding of its consumer education function (i.e., described it as a rating scale to rank providers in terms of quality; table 3). No survey respondent said they were “very familiar” with Capital Quality. Parents learned about Capital Quality from a variety of sources, including OSSE-affiliated websites such as My Child Care DC and the DC Child Care Connections website, from their child care providers or another provider’s advertisement. Several survey respondents had worked or volunteered in a child care setting or a related field where they heard about Capital Quality.

Only one in four parents who knew about Capital Quality used its quality designations to help select a provider, equal to about 4 percent of all surveyed parents (table 3). However, parents who used

Capital Quality designations did so in ways important for child care selection. For example, one parent explained how she narrowed her search to only programs rated High Quality or Quality in the Capital Quality system. Other parents mentioned the Capital Quality designation helped them confirm the quality and safety of the provider beyond their personal research and recommendations they received. It also helped them eliminate providers that had quality improvement issues they were not comfortable with from their search.

TABLE 3
DC Parents' Ratings of Familiarity with Capital Quality

	N	%
Familiarity with Capital Quality		
Not at all familiar	114	83.2%
Somewhat familiar	23	16.8%
Very familiar	0	0%
Use of Capital Quality designations to help select a provider		
Yes	6	26.1%
No	17	73.9%

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for these items were 137 and 23 respondents, respectively.

It's my number one factor to identify quality programs. I used the filter on the [My Child Care DC] website to identify High Quality programs in my neighborhood, and there were zero. I had to reduce the vigor to find Quality and "accept voucher," and none of those had slots. It was very challenging to identify High Quality programs that accepted the voucher.

—DC parent surveyed

Some parents who knew about Capital Quality at the time of the survey only recently became aware of it after choosing a child care provider, so the quality designation did not influence their selection. A few others were unclear what metrics were used to determine quality designations and how they should apply that information to their search. Several felt Capital Quality ratings were only one piece of information and should not determine their choice. At least one parent said they did not use the ratings because they worried they were outdated (rated in 2019 when they were looking for child care in 2022). Box 2 shares additional information on parents' views toward quality ratings.

BOX 2

Parents' Views on Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

We asked all parents what they thought about the idea of child care programs being rated for their level of quality. An overwhelming majority of parents (84 percent) shared positive responses. Many parents did not elaborate, but those who did focused on the following areas:

- ***The importance of getting this information to parents to support decisionmaking and ease any anxiety they may have*** (41 participants). One parent said, “I think it gives parents a sense of letting them know that my child will be in good hands, and I won’t have to worry about them being treated badly and will be supported in the things they need.”
- ***Helping providers understand their strengths and weaknesses and helping them improve*** (16 participants). One parent shared, “I think everyone should [be rated.] It lets them know where they need to improve, how they need to improve, helps them be better...Instead of casting them out as a bad facility, you teach them and train them so they can become better.”
- ***The importance of transparency and accountability in child care*** (11 participants). Five parents shared that while this concept is important, they feel as though Capital Quality could be better marketed and that information about it should be more accessible to parents.

Seven parents (5 percent) felt neutral or did not know how they felt about the concept of facilities being rated; 3 parents (2 percent) did not provide a clear response to this question.

Twelve parents (9 percent) shared mixed perspectives on the concept of facilities being rated for their quality. Most of these responses focused on the complexity of child care and the challenge of designing effective metrics to fairly measure quality across different settings. Six of these twelve parents with mixed views noted that the concept is good in theory but may disadvantage providers who have fewer resources to start out with. Example quotes include the following:

[Capital Quality] is used for marketing. That’s the way I see it. It’s not necessarily that because a place doesn’t have the best ratings that they’re not good. Sometimes they’re just starting out. There’s different reasons why they don’t have a ranking, I wouldn’t just use that as my guide.

I’m not sure how helpful [Capital Quality] is. It would be different if we had so many child care facilities that we had the option to pick and choose. But it’s short-sighted, because we all don’t have that option. If you get a spot you take it. People don’t have a lot of luxury of being able to pick and choose their location—as long as the place is loving and good.

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Number of Providers Parents Considered

As mentioned, about 25 percent of surveyed parents did not actively search for a child care program because they already knew where they wanted to enroll. Others looked but only considered one program while some considered multiple. Specifically, more than half of surveyed parents (58 percent) considered more than one provider during their search (figure 8). The other 42 percent described the following as some of the reasons for considering only one provider:

- accessibility of the location (i.e., having child care close to home, work, or school; 19 mentions)
- knowing someone, usually a friend or family member, who had sent their child there (9 mentions)
- receiving a referral from a friend or family member (8 mentions)
- knowing a staff member at the facility (7 mentions)
- the availability of slots (i.e., they knew the program had an opening; 2 mentions)
- having another child previously or currently enrolled there (9 mentions)

Other reasons mentioned by at least one parent included affordability, positive reviews, feeling comfortable with the provider, and the availability of comprehensive support services through the program, such as offering diapers and parenting classes.

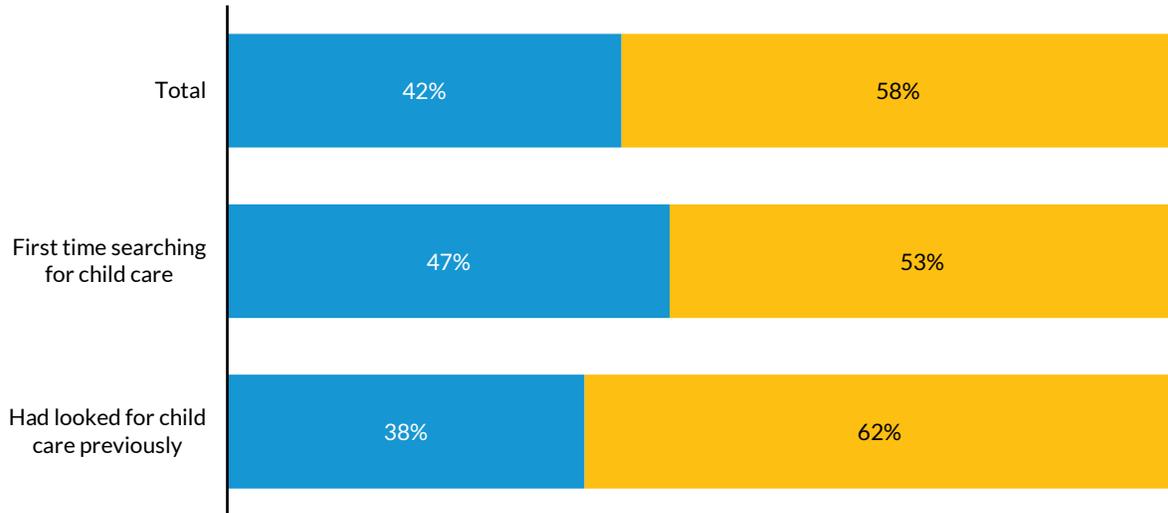
Parents who were searching for child care for the first time were more likely than parents with prior search experience to report that they considered only one provider rather than multiple (figure 8). Similarly, parents who received a subsidy were more likely than parents without a subsidy to report considering only one provider (figure 9). Having a subsidy appears to shape how parents search for care, but the data do not fully explain this correlation.

FIGURE 8

Parents Were More Likely to Consider Only One Provider Rather than Multiple When This Was Their First Time Looking for Child Care

Whether parents considered multiple providers if they had ever looked for child care before for any child

■ Only one provider ■ More than one provider



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

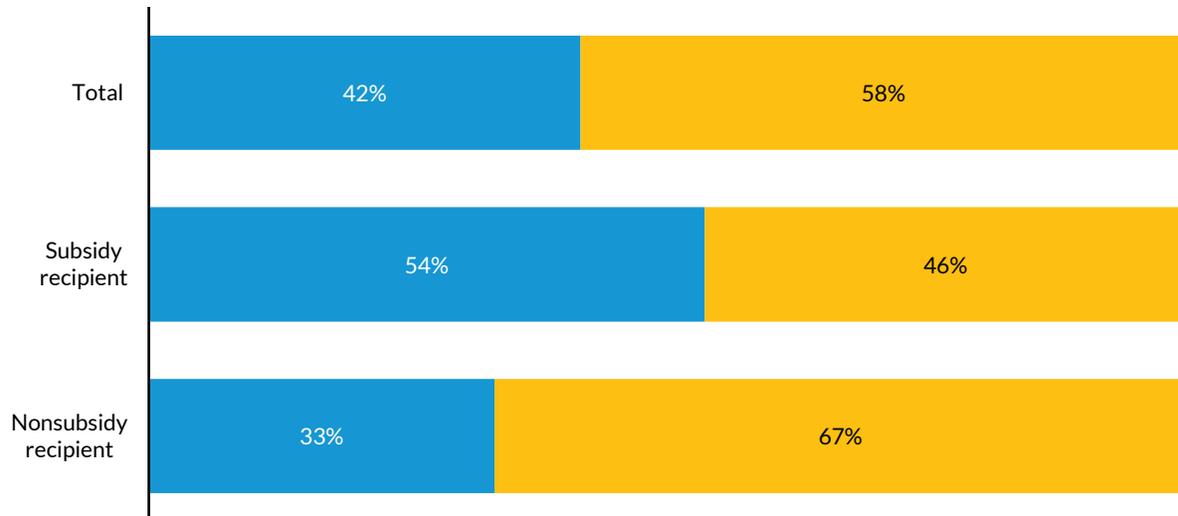
Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

FIGURE 9

Parents Were More Likely to Consider Only One Provider If They Received a Subsidy

Whether parents considered multiple providers if they were subsidy recipients or not

■ Only one provider ■ More than one provider



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

Priorities When Looking for and Selecting Child Care

As parents look for child care, they often consider different factors such as cost, location, schedule, and other program features. The survey asked parents to rate a set of factors on a scale of 1 to 5 to indicate how important each factor was to them when they last looked for child care.

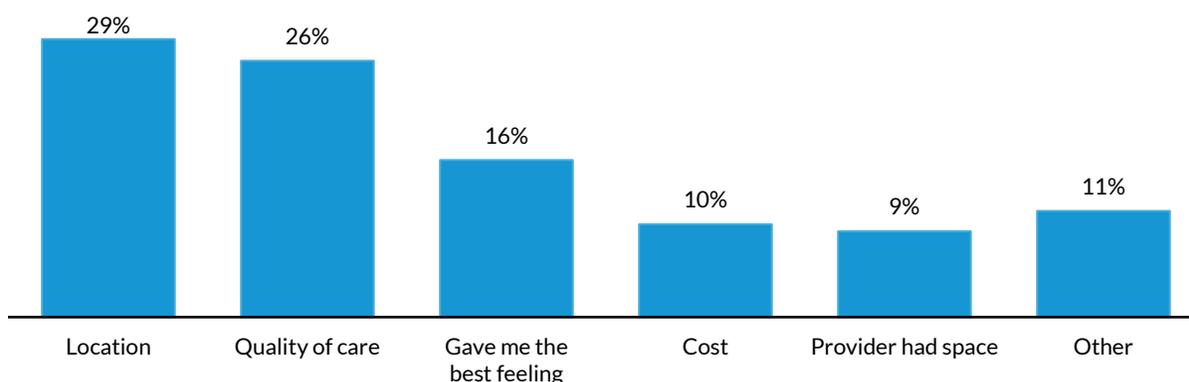
For most parents (67 percent), it was crucial that their child care costs were within their budget. Parents were just as concerned about the program’s curriculum (69 percent noted that this was crucial) (figure 11). Parents’ descriptions of their search experiences suggest they were not necessarily looking for a specific curriculum (e.g., The Creative Curriculum; Frog Street Curriculum) but rather that the program offered a structured learning environment and activities. Elements of program quality, such as accreditation and staff qualifications, also rose to the top. Opinions were split on certain factors, such as providing meals, availability of instruction in another language, and accessible via public transportation, where roughly the same percentage of parents said “not at all important” (27 to 38 percent) as said “crucial” (31 to 40 percent). Offering care on the weekends and providing transportation were important to a smaller share of parents (roughly 15 to 20 percent said “important,” “very important,” or “crucial”).

We also asked parents the main reason why they chose their current child care provider. The top reasons were location and quality of care, followed by “gave me the best feeling” (figure 10). Nearly 10 percent said cost was the main reason and nine percent said because “the provider had space,” suggesting their options were limited or they took what they could find.

FIGURE 10

Parents Most Commonly Chose Their Current Provider because of the Location or Care Quality

Main reason parent selected current child care provider



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

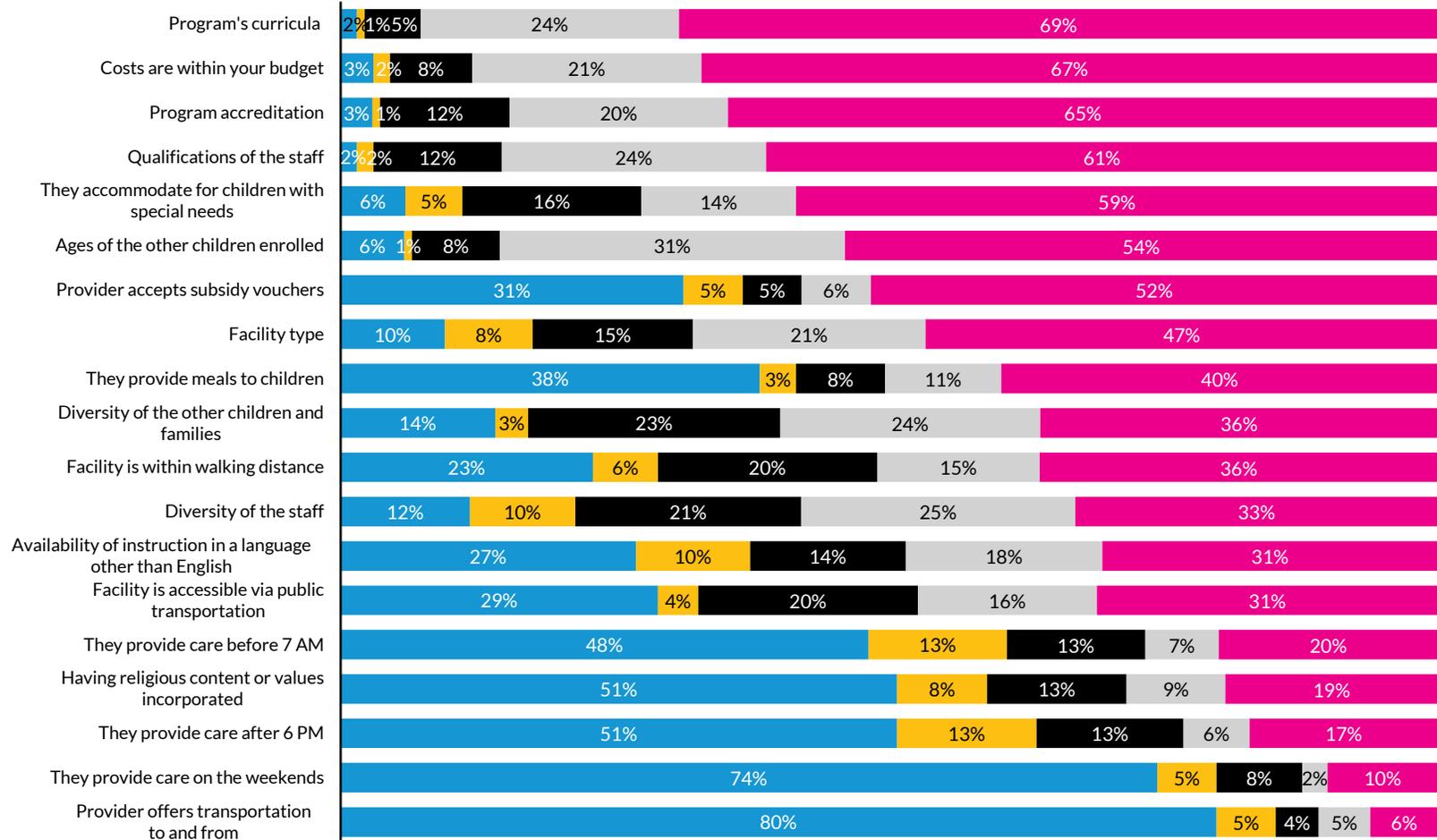
Notes: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents. “Other” reasons included “Diversity of staff or children,” “Schedule,” “I had another child enrolled there,” and “I had no other choice.” All these items were consolidated into one category because of sample size restrictions.

FIGURE 11

Parents' Child Care Search Priorities Related to Cost, Location, Schedules, and Special Needs Accommodations

Think about your latest search for care. On a scale of 1 to 5, how important were each of these things to you?

■ Not at all important ■ Slightly important ■ Important ■ Very important ■ Crucial



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: Sample sizes for each survey item ranged from 112 to 137 respondents.

Difficulty or Ease of Child Care Search Experience

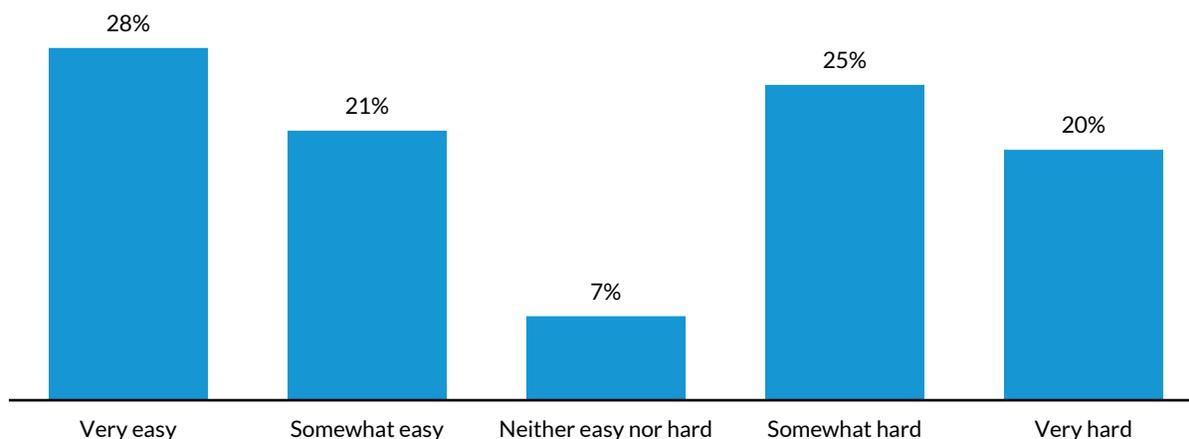
As mentioned, some parents took longer to find a child care program than others and some parents had previous experience and others did not. We aimed to understand how easy or difficult the experience of looking for child care was and reasons why. The survey asked respondents to rate their overall experience and report if they had difficulty finding child care that met certain criteria, such as having open slots, being affordable, or having the desired quality. We examined their responses across different racial and ethnic groups and by subsidy receipt, parents' educational attainment, prior child care search experience, and whether their child had an older sibling or not.

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" (figure 12).

FIGURE 12

Parents Reported a Mix of Experiences Looking for Child Care

How easy or hard was the process of finding child care?



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

Parents had difficulty finding care that had open slots (48 percent), was affordable (45 percent), was available during the hours they needed (35 percent), and was in a convenient location (34 percent; table 4). Other features were less of a challenge to find, including finding care in the setting they wanted (e.g., center or home), a provider that spoke the parent's preferred language, and a program that could meet the child's individual needs (12 to 18 percent reported these as challenges). Regarding language, several parents who were native English speakers described wanting a bilingual program where their

children could learn another language. Thirty-four percent faced difficulty because programs were unresponsive when they reached out (e.g., did not return their phone calls).

Without prepandemic data, it is unclear how these estimates compare and whether searching for child care during 2021–22 was any more challenging. Parents’ open-ended responses, however, explained what made the experience of searching for child care during the pandemic unique.

Nobody calls you back, it’s like a black hole, so it was pretty stressful and difficult...The administrative side of a lot of the day cares is really lacking. Some waitlists, we didn’t hear back. Yes, it’s a very difficult process. Even though we eventually got in, we basically harassed them...had to ask them if we were getting a slot. Even now with a [new] baby, they aren’t committing to a slot and saying “maybe.” It’s not easy.

–DC parent surveyed

TABLE 4

Areas of Difficulty Finding Child Care

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

	N	%
had open slots for new children	66	48%
is affordable	61	45%
is available during the hours needed	48	35%
is in a location that is convenient	47	34%
was responsive when reached out to	47	34%
had the quality of care desired	40	29%
had the desired level of diversity in the children or staff	31	23%
you believed would be a safe place	29	21%
was in the type of care setting you wanted	25	18%
speaks your preferred language	17	12%
could meet your child’s individual needs	17	12%

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

Nearly half of the sample (48 percent) had an older-sibling child (i.e., a big brother or sister to the focal child for whom they were looking for child care). Parents generally reported having an easier time

finding child care if their focal child had an older sibling, with 38 percent reporting “very easy” compared with 18 percent reported by parents without older-sibling children (figure 13). Some of these parents used the same provider their older child did, so they did not need to search for a new provider, or their experience with child care for their older child made them feel more prepared.

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 (figure 14). 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.

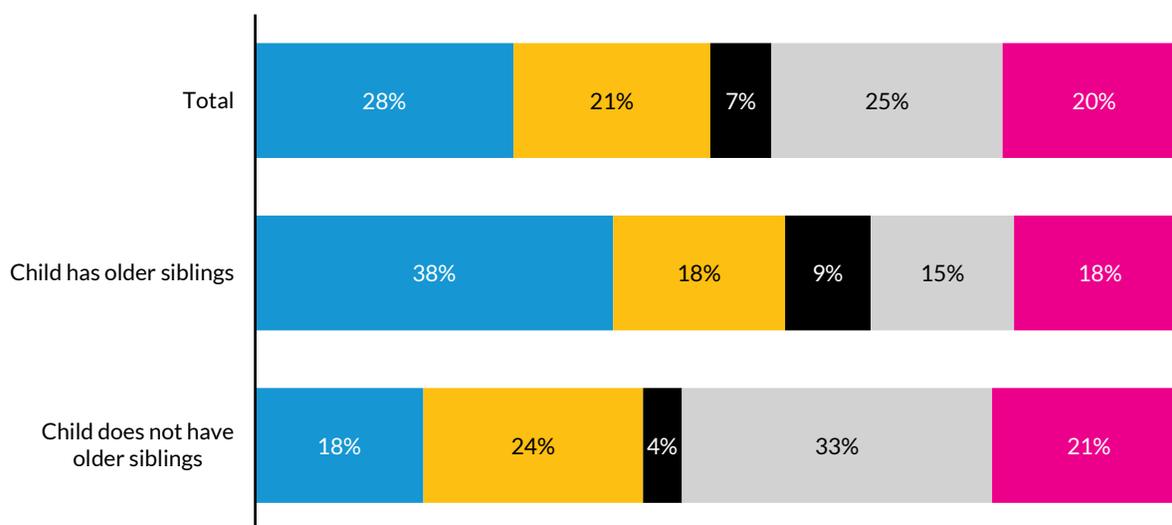
We observe some racial and ethnic differences in parents’ search experiences.¹ Black and Latino parents generally reported having an easier time finding care than white parents. Whereas 34 percent of Black parents and 47 percent of Latino parents said the experience was “very easy,” only nine percent of white parents felt that way (figure 15).

FIGURE 13

Parents Generally Reported Having an Easier Time Finding Child Care If Their Child Has an Older Sibling

How easy or hard the process of finding child care was for parents with and without an older child

■ Very easy ■ Somewhat easy ■ Neither easy nor hard ■ Somewhat hard ■ Very hard



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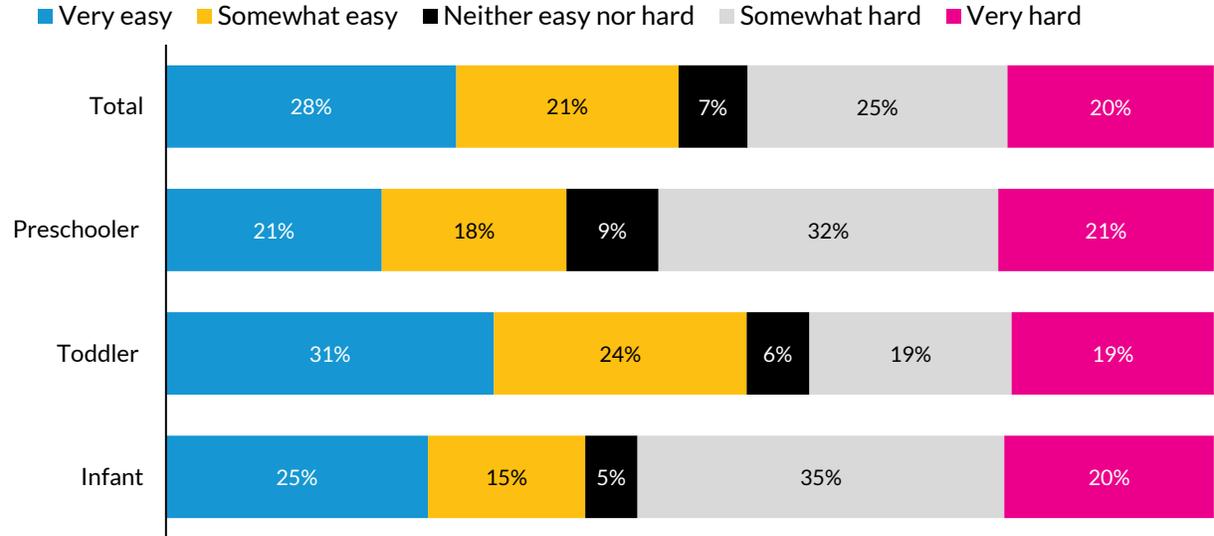
Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

FIGURE 14

Parents of Preschoolers and Infants Had a More Difficult Time Finding Child Care than Parents of Toddlers

How easy or hard the process of finding care was for parents with children across different age groups



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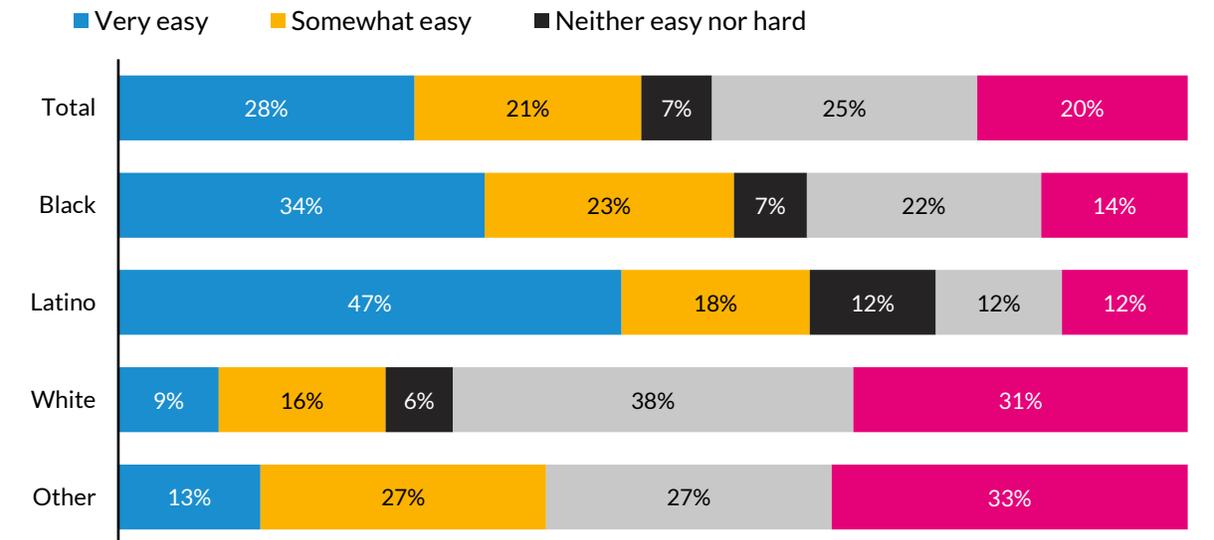
Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

FIGURE 15

Black and Latino Parents Generally Reported Having an Easier Time Finding Care than White Parents

How easy or hard the process of finding care was for parents across different racial and ethnic identities



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

Based on our qualitative analysis of open-ended survey questions, some participants reported challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and how it impacted their search, including

- not being able to tour the facilities in person and, in some cases, having to rely on video tours,
- a concern for health and safety,
- lack of openings,
- masking and vaccination questions, and
- child care facilities reducing care hours, which did not meet families' care needs.

With COVID, many facilities don't allow people in the building, so it's difficult to get a sense of a center we've never visited. You can't visit when children are present to see how staff interact with children. You're forced to make a decision from a web page or phone call, and that was hard.

—DC parent surveyed

Several respondents shared that a lack of communication and transparency created difficulties in their search for child care. They reported not hearing back from child care providers in general (specifically, about waiting lists) and long wait times for providers to return calls.

More than one-third (38 percent) of surveyed parents were put on a waiting list, and of those on a waiting list, nearly 30 percent paid a waiting list fee (table 5). Length of time on a waiting list varied, with roughly a third of the sample off the list in less than three months and another third on the list for six or more months.

TABLE 5

Parents' Waiting List Experiences*Experiences of being wait-listed, paying waiting list fees, and length of wait before acceptance*

	N	%
Parent was on a waiting list at current provider	52	38.0%
Paid a waiting list fee	15	28.8%
Length of time on waiting list		
Less than 3 months	18	35.0%
3 to 5 months	17	33.0%
6 months or more	17	33.0%

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample sizes for these items were 137 and 52 respondents.

Additionally, some survey respondents reported that determining whether they qualified for a subsidy made the search process difficult, while others shared that they were unsure if a provider would accept a subsidy and had difficulty finding an available spot for their child in a program that accepts subsidies. Among the 56 subsidy recipients in the survey sample, 12 (21 percent) said they had difficulty finding a provider they liked that accepted a subsidy voucher. According to My Child Care DC, 275 of the 490 licensed child care facilities in DC (56 percent) accept a subsidy voucher, and among those, 102 (37 percent) have a quality designation of Quality or High-Quality.²

Finding high-quality care that accepts subsidy is very difficult. We were on the waitlist, and I struggled with two very high-quality facilities. The provider dragged their feet on the approval process for the voucher, I found that to be extremely inequitable...It was very challenging and frustrating process to get her enrolled in a program that was both high quality and met all of my needs in terms of convenience, location, and operating hours, and accepting subsidy voucher. That was the hardest combination...quality and accepts the subsidy.

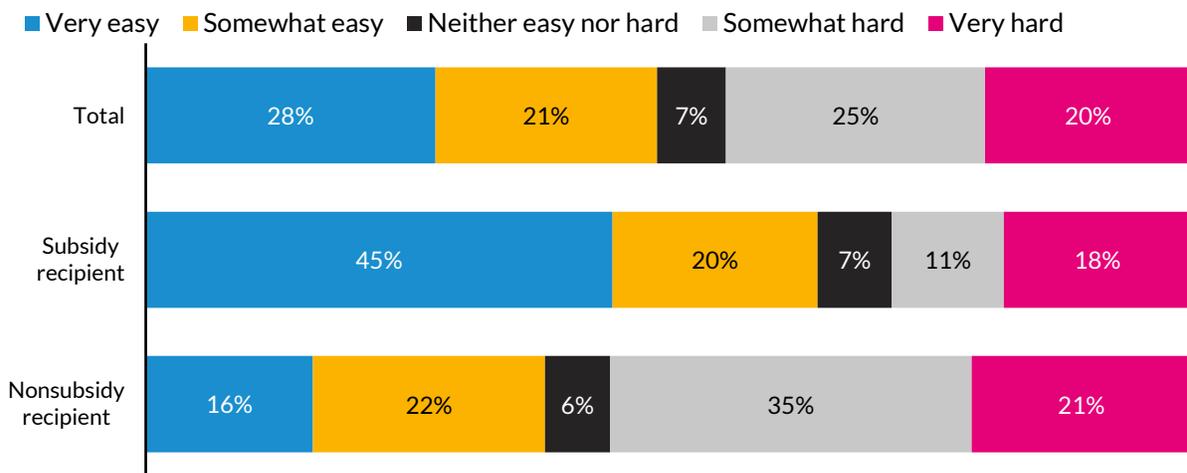
—DC parent surveyed

Even with these concerns, subsidy recipients overall 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 percent and 16 percent, respectively) and less likely to describe it as somewhat or “very hard” (29 and 56 percent, respectively) (figure 14).

Parents who did not receive a subsidy were more likely than subsidy recipients to report that they had difficulty finding care that was affordable (65 percent and 14 percent, respectively; not shown). Because subsidy recipients could only use their voucher in select facilities that accept vouchers, the search process was somewhat simplified for them. Those who had a harder time typically did so because of their location or because facilities close by were unresponsive or did not fully meet their needs.

FIGURE 14
Parents with a Child Care Subsidy Voucher Generally Reported Having an Easier Time Finding Care than Parents without a Subsidy

How easy or hard the process of finding child care was for subsidy recipients compared with nonrecipients



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

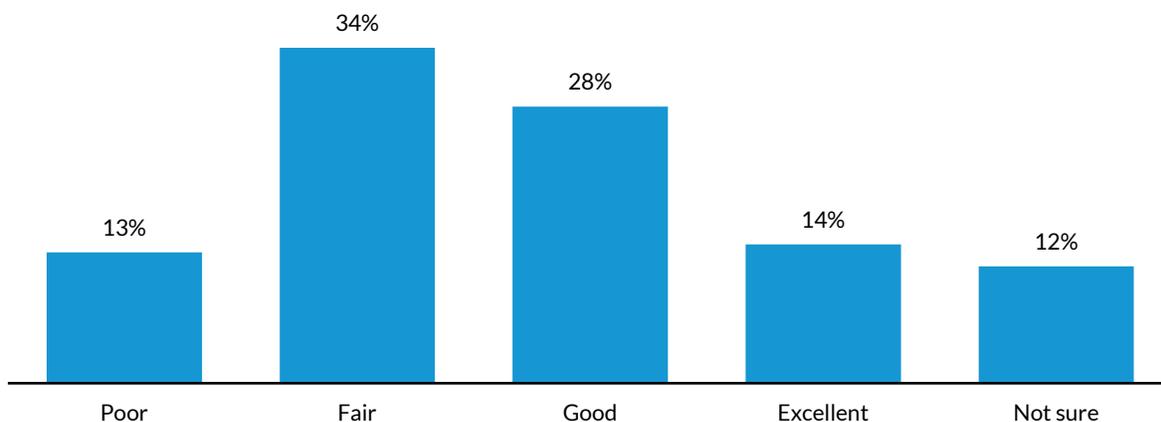
Perceptions of Care Supply and Access

The survey asked respondents to rate the overall supply of child care in DC on a scale of poor to excellent. The most common response was “fair,” reported by 34 percent of parents, and “good,” reported by 28 percent. Only 14 percent said “excellent,” and 12 percent were not sure (figure 16).

FIGURE 16

Most Parents Rated the Overall Supply of DC Child Care as Fair or Good

Overall, how would you rate the supply of child care in the District of Columbia?



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Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample size for this item was 137 respondents.

We also asked parents: “Do you feel there are good choices for child care and early education near your home?” The majority (64 percent) said “yes,” but 22 percent said “no” and 14 percent said “I don’t know,” suggesting variation in families’ access to child care programs that meet their needs (table 6). We also asked whether they had good options near work or school, for those who were employed or in school. For that question, many parents (66 percent) reported they did not know, suggesting they use care near home and are unfamiliar with options near work or school, and others were split on their perspectives. Several parents worked from home, so their work location was the same as home.³

TABLE 6

Parents’ Perspectives on the Care Options Near Their Homes and Work or School

Do you feel there are good choices for child care or early childhood programs near your home and near where you work or go to school?

	N	%
Good choices near home		
Yes	88	64.2%
No	30	21.9%
I don’t know		13.9%
Good choices near work or school		
Yes	19	15.0%
No	24	18.9%
I don’t know	84	66.1%

Source: 2022 DC Parent Survey.

Note: The responding sample sizes for these survey items were 137 and 127 respondents, respectively.

More than a quarter of surveyed parents (26 percent) reported that there was another provider they preferred but could not use. In an open-ended question, they cited a number of reasons why they preferred another provider, the most common being a more convenient location (11 parents), better program quality (11 parents), and offering languages other than English (5 parents). Other reasons included the program style or setting (4 parents), a smaller program with a higher ratio of staff to children (3 parents), personal connections to staff or owners (3 parents), the facility itself (2 parents), and diversity (2 parents).

When asked why they could not use the provider they preferred, availability and cost were the most common answers. Fourteen parents shared that either the waiting list was too long or there were no open slots at the program they preferred. Twelve parents shared that the program they preferred was much more expensive than they could afford. Other reasons cited included less convenient location, hours did not align with their needs, and the program shut down (because of COVID-19 or otherwise).

Conclusion

As DC parents looked for child care in the year after the COVID-19 pandemic began, they faced some unusual challenges, such as not being able to visit programs in person and finding programs operating with reduced schedules. Perceptions of local care supply and parents' search experiences varied widely, with some reporting very positive views and an easy experience and others reporting more negative perceptions of the DC child care supply and greater challenges finding care.

Cost was a driving factor as parents searched, and nearly half of surveyed parents said it was difficult to find open slots and an affordable program. Parents with a subsidy voucher searched within the pool of providers that accept vouchers—which is about half of facilities in DC. Location was key to parents' final decisions. In a large urban area where many families walk or rely on public transportation, parents said location, followed by quality, was a main reason they selected their child care provider. Finding a provider within walking distance or accessible by public transportation was important to most parents as they searched.

Parents relied heavily on word-of-mouth communication and referrals from friends and relatives to find care. Although searching online was a top method for learning about care, only 38 percent of parents used the My Child Care DC website, and others reported not knowing about it. Knowing how parents search for care and where they feel challenged can help inform DC leaders, so information can

be shared more effectively. OSSE has plans to launch a campaign in 2023 to advertise My Child Care DC, which should help educate more families on this important resource.

The fact that half of surveyed parents had a somewhat or very easy time finding child care is promising. Moreover, about two-thirds enrolled in their current program without being on a waiting list. The variation in parents' experiences points to local neighborhood differences, with waiting lists and access issues more concerning in some areas than others. These survey findings suggest the overall supply of care in terms of number of slots may be adequate for now to meet parental demand, at least in most wards. Investments designed to support and stabilize the child care market postpandemic should consider parents' concerns about quality, affordability, and scheduling. In crafting future strategies to improve families' experiences accessing child care, the District may want to prioritize expanding resources for existing programs so they can staff appropriately and align with families' schedules and desires for program quality.⁴

Notes

- ¹ Consistent with the way the US Census collects race and ethnicity data, our survey used the following categories and language when collecting information from the parents we surveyed: White; Black or African American; American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander; Middle Eastern or North African; and Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin. We also allowed respondents to specify any race or ethnicity not in the categories mentioned. For our analysis, because of disclosure concerns, we combine Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern or North African into an “Other” category. Additionally, throughout this report, we shorten the Black or African American race label to “Black” and the Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin label to “Latino.”
- ² “My Child Care DC,” accessed on October 18, 2022, <https://mychildcare.dc.gov/MyChildCare/home>.
- ³ Kyle Cooper, “Report: DC Is the Nation’s Work from Home Capital,” *WTOP News*, September 23, 2022, <https://wtop.com/business-finance/2022/09/report-dc-is-the-work-from-home-capital/>.
- ⁴ As one example of ongoing efforts, OSSE designed the “Access to Quality Child Care Grant” program to support current and future child development facility operators to expand, open, and improve new and existing child development facilities. For more information, visit <https://osse.dc.gov/page/access-quality-child-care-grant> (accessed October 18, 2022).

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