ASPE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION | OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY

BRIEF
November 10, 2026

# Most Parents of Young Children Prefer Either Parental Care or a Home-Based Setting, Though Preferences Vary by Child Age

Jessica Rendon and Alayna Schreier

## KEY POINTS

- Parents want different things when it comes to child care.
- Among parents with a child under five, a majority want either parental care or a home-based provider (61 percent combined). Among just parents of three and four year-olds (preschool-aged children), more parents report wanting center-based care compared with parents of younger children, but a majority still prefer parental or home-based care.
- Preferences shift meaningfully with child age: parents of children ages zero to two (infants and toddlers) are more likely to want home-based care (29 percent) than parents of three and four year-olds (21 percent), while the reverse holds for center-based care.
- Actual child care arrangements should not be treated as a direct measure of what parents want; cost, local supply, and availability all shape what families end up using, independent of what they would prefer.
- Finding care that matches a family's needs is a significant challenge for many parents, even when cost is not a consideration. Availability of open slots and hours that align with work schedules are the most commonly cited difficulties.

## BACKGROUND

Understanding parents' preferences for child care — and how those preferences align with what is actually available to parents — is central to understanding child care demand and the policy levers that shape supply. Parents weigh many factors when considering the best available child care arrangement for their family, including type of care setting, safety, cost, location, hours, and quality.[1] Families with infants or non-traditional work schedules face particular constraints in finding care that meets their needs.[2] For some families, parental care itself is a preferred arrangement.[3] Stated preferences and actual care arrangements often diverge, particularly for center-based care among young children.

In this brief, we analyze the 2024 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) household survey to describe parents' child care preferences, priorities, and decisions.

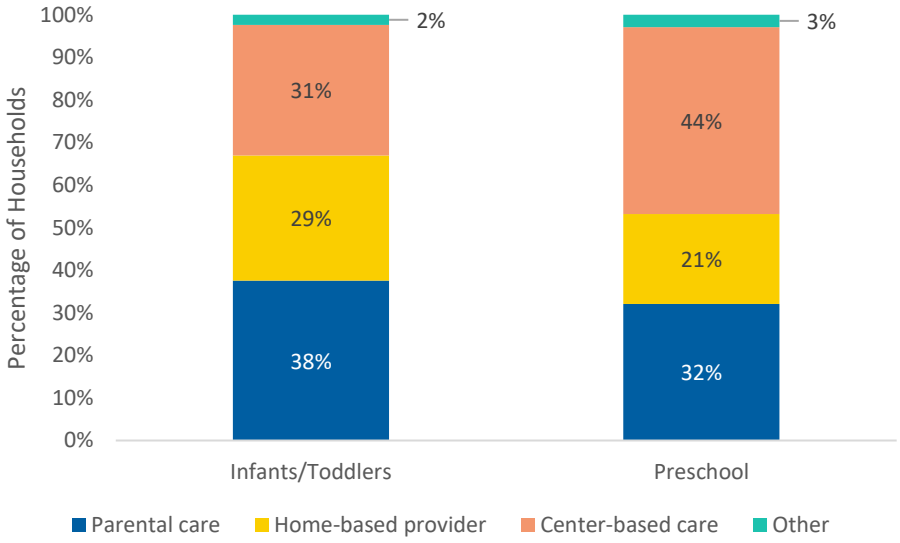
## FAMILY PREFERENCES VARY, BUT A MAJORITY OF PARENTS PRIORITIZE PARENTAL OR HOME-BASED CARE

Among parents of a child under age five, 35 percent report they would most want parental care and 26 percent report they would most want a home-based provider — together, 61 percent favor care outside of a center setting.[i,4] This compares to 36 percent that report they would most want a center-based provider.

This overall pattern is the same for both infants/toddlers and preschoolers, though preferences shift somewhat by the child's age (Figure 1): 67 percent of parents of children under age three prefer a home-based provider or parental care (with parental care being the most preferred), compared to only 31 percent who prefer a center-based provider. Among parents of children ages three and four, 53 percent prefer parental care or a home-based provider, compared with 44 percent who prefer a center-based provider.

While preference for parental care is higher among parents of infants and toddlers (38 percent), it remains the preference of a substantial portion of parents of preschoolers (32 percent), suggesting this is a valued option for parents across children's age ranges.

**Figure 1. Type of Child Care Most Wanted, by Age of Child: The Majority of Parents Prefer Parental or Home-Based Care**




Source: Authors' analysis of 2024 NSECE Household Survey data, households with focal child under 5 years old

Regardless of work status, parents continue to prefer parental or home-based care over center-based care: 55 percent of households where all parents work, 71 percent where some parents work, and 64 percent where no parents work prefer parental or home-based care to center-based care (Figure 2).

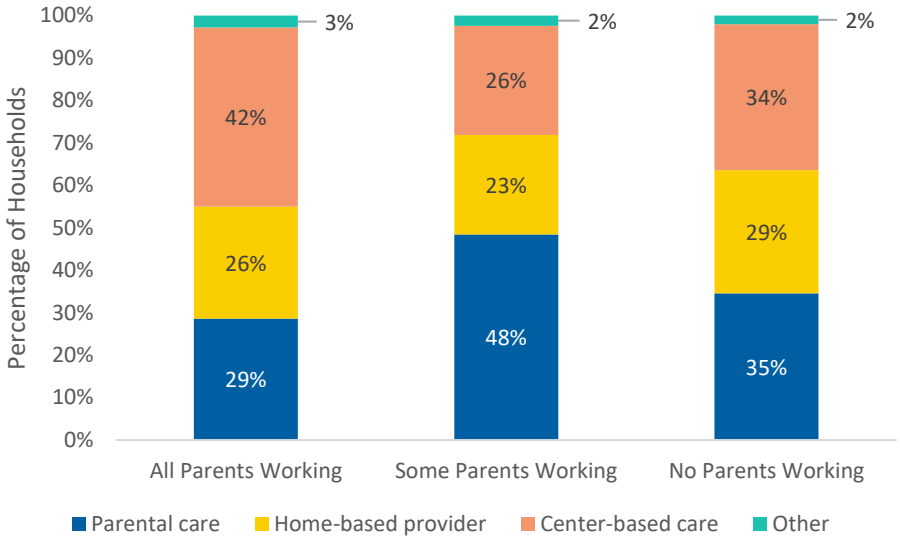
Among parents of a child under five, those in households where only some parents work are more likely to prefer parental care (48 percent) than those in households where all parents work (29 percent). The reverse

[i] Findings on type of child care most wanted by age of child and parental work status are consistent with OPRE Report #2026-075, *NSECE Snapshot: Parents' Preferences, Choices, and Experiences Searching for Child Care for Children Under 5 Years Old* (forthcoming). The authors' analytic approach to other parts of this brief was also informed by these OPRE analyses, though all estimates in this brief were independently produced by the authors using 2024 NSECE Household Survey data unless otherwise noted.

holds for center-based care: parents in households where all parents work are more likely to prefer center-based care (42 percent) than those in households where only some parents work (26 percent).

This relationship should not be interpreted as establishing that parental employment causes a shift in preference, or vice versa; a non-working parent is, by definition, more readily available to provide parental care, which may account for some portion of this difference.

**Figure 2. Type of Child Care Most Wanted, by Parental Work Status: The Majority of Parents Prefer Parental or Home-Based Care**




Source: Authors' analysis of 2024 NSECE Household Survey data, households with focal child under 5 years old

## Actual care arrangements also vary by age, with over one-third of parents who say they would prefer parental care actually using other arrangements

Reports of preferred care describe a hypothetical choice; the arrangements children are actually enrolled in also reflect cost, availability, and family circumstances. Some parents value the familiarity or flexibility of care by someone they have a prior relationship with, like a relative or friend. Families may also prefer the flexibility of a smaller setting of home-based care, while others place greater weight on the structured learning and peer interaction they associate with centers.

Care patterns for young children differ substantially by age: parental and home-based arrangements are most common among infants and toddlers, while center-based care is most common among preschool-age children.[5] While this mirrors the findings about care preferences at a high level, the share of parents actually in these types of arrangements varies from their stated preferences.

Our analysis of the 2024 NSECE data found that about 22 percent of households with a child under age five use only parental care, lower than the 35 percent of parents who report they would most want parental care if cost and location were not barriers. Other published estimates on children's participation in child care show that among children under age three, 53 percent received regular nonparental care in 2024.[6] Unpaid care from an individual other than a parent was the most common type (24 percent), followed by center-based care (18 percent). Among children ages three through five, 69 percent received regular nonparental care. Center-based care was the most common type (42 percent), followed by unpaid individual care (27 percent).

Center-based care shows a different relationship to stated preferences by age. Among children under age three, 18 percent attended center-based care, while 31 percent named it as their most wanted arrangement. Among children ages three through five, the data were more aligned: 42 percent attended center-based care and 44 percent of parents preferred it.

## FINDING AND CHOOSING CHILD CARE IS CHALLENGING FOR MANY FAMILIES

There are differences in the reasons parents choose parental versus nonparental care (Table 1). For households choosing parental care, cost was the leading reason (39.2 percent), compared with 10.6 percent of households choosing nonparental care. A separate national survey similarly found cost was the most cited factor in choosing parental care.[7] Quality of care was the most cited main reason for choosing nonparental care (23.7 percent).

**Table 1. Main Reason for Household's Care Decision, by Parental vs. Nonparental Care**

| Reason | Chose parental care | Chose nonparental care |
|---|---|---|
| Cost | 39.2% | 10.6% |
| Quality of care | 10.9% | 23.7% |
| Provider had space available | 0.9% | 11.3% |
| Location | 2.0% | 9.0% |
| Had no other choices | 18.0% | 12.5% |
| Best feeling | 12.8% | 17.5% |
| Schedule | 8.4% | 7.2% |
| Other | 7.7% | 8.2% |

Source: Authors' analysis of 2024 NSECE Household Survey data, households with focal child under 5 years old who have searched for care in the last two years

Among families using nonparental care, priorities differ by setting. In a study of low-income parents in one state, prioritizing convenient location and flexible hours was associated with choosing family child care (a type of home-based care), while prioritizing support for learning was associated with choosing center-based care.[8] Parents who prioritized trust in the provider were less likely to choose center-based care.[9]

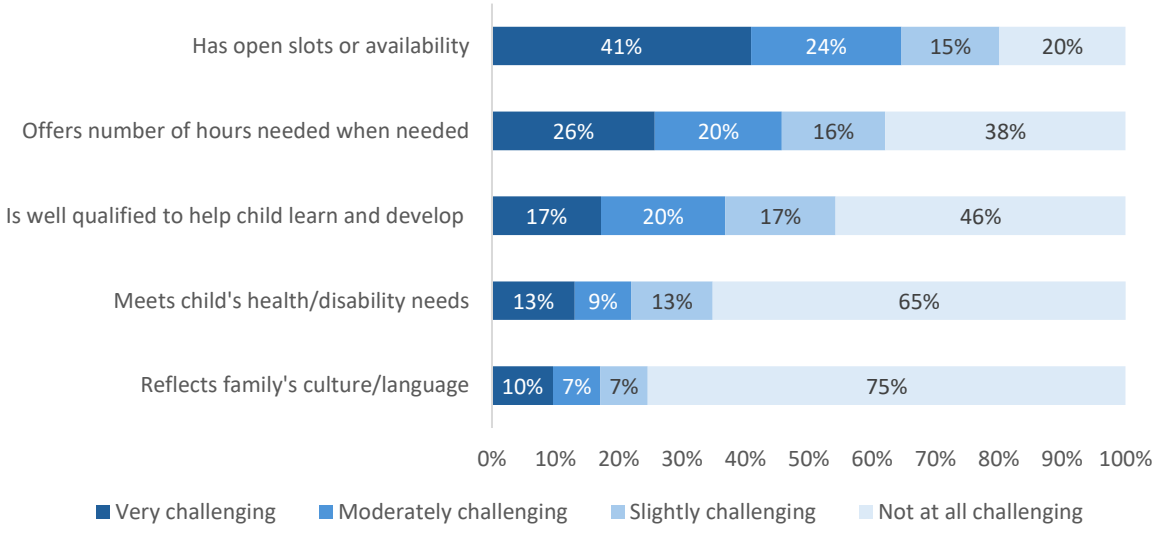
### About half of parents say they have limited choices in child care

Only 52 percent of parents with a child under age five reported having more than one option when choosing care, according to our analysis of the 2024 NSECE. A separate 2024 ACF-funded survey also points to constrained choices: half of parents who chose a new or existing nonparental provider reported no more than one option that met their family's needs, while 43 percent of those who chose parental care reported no alternatives that met their family's needs.[10]

### Most parents describe finding providers with open slots and needed hours as challenging

As seen in Figure 3, among households that searched for care for a child under age five, finding a provider with open slots was the most common challenge: 65 percent said it was very or moderately challenging. In addition, finding a provider that offered the hours they needed was very or moderately challenging for 46 percent of parents, followed by finding one qualified to support their child's learning and development (37 percent). Fewer reported those levels of difficulty finding a provider who met their child's health or disability needs (22 percent) or reflected their family's culture or language (17 percent).

**Figure 3. How Challenging It Was to Find a Provider with Certain Characteristics: Availability Cited as Very or Moderately Challenging for a Majority of Families**




Source: Authors' analysis of 2024 NSECE Household Survey data, households with focal child under 5 years old

### Recent trends in prices and care availability may further constrain families' choices

Child care prices have risen faster than overall inflation in recent years, increasing 29 percent from 2020 to 2024, compared with a 22 percent rise in overall consumer prices.[11] Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that daycare and preschool prices also rose faster than overall prices in 2024 (5.9 percent versus 2.9 percent).[12]

Over the same period, other aspects of the child care market further constrained families' choices. NSECE data indicate the total number of home-based providers declined by 15 percent, not including unlisted unpaid providers, between 2019 and 2024.[13] The share of listed home-based providers accepting children with subsidies also declined, from 35 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2024.[14]

In addition, the share of center-based and home-based providers offering care during non-standard hours declined between 2019 and 2024. For example, 19 percent of listed home-based providers (i.e., those that are licensed, regulated, license-exempt, or otherwise registered) offered non-standard hours in 2024 compared to 24 percent in 2019. Similarly, only six percent of center-based providers offered non-standard hours in 2024, down from nine percent in 2019.[15]

Despite most parents' stated preference for parental or home-based care among infants and toddlers, the share of infants and toddlers enrolled in center-based care increased between 2019 and 2024, while the share enrolled in home-based settings showed no statistically significant change. Specifically, the share of children under age three using center-based care rose from 14.3 percent in 2019 to 18.2 percent in 2024, while the share using individual unpaid care — the largest home-based category — declined only slightly and not significantly, from 26.5 percent to 24.4 percent.[16]

## CONCLUSION

Parents' preferences for child care vary considerably. A majority prefer parental or home-based care overall. While an increasing number of parents prefer center-based care as children approach preschool age, a majority still prefer parental or home-based options. Similarly, while preference for center-based care also increases with the number of working parents in the household, a majority of parents – regardless of work

status – prefer parental or home-based care. Stated preferences and actual care usage frequently diverge, particularly with respect to center-based care for infants and toddlers. Many parents face substantial difficulty finding care that meets their family's needs, independent of cost — most commonly due to limited provider availability and difficulty securing care during needed hours.

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**SUGGESTED CITATION**
Rendon, J., and Schreier, A. Most Parents of Young Children Prefer Either Parental Care or a Home-Based Setting, Though Preferences Vary by Child Age. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. November 2026.

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