

How and why do caregivers search for child care?

Findings from the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment

Part I of the Family Survey and Focus Groups Brief Series
April 2025 | Erin Bumgarner, Jessica Goldberg, Michelle Thompson

For families with young children, finding high-quality, affordable child care is a critical yet often challenging task. Across the United States, including in Massachusetts, caregivers often face challenges navigating the complex process of securing child care.ⁱ Common challenges include balancing financial constraints, identifying care options that are trustworthy and align well with work schedules and family values, and ensuring the developmental needs of their children are met. In Massachusetts, where child care costs rank among the highest in the nation,ⁱⁱ these obstacles are especially acute for families with infants and toddlers, those living in child care deserts, and families with specific cultural or linguistic needs.ⁱⁱⁱ

This brief presents findings from the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment, which included a survey and set of focus groups with caregivers in 2024. As shown in Exhibit 1 below, the needs assessment allowed us to address research questions about caregivers' experiences as they searched for child care, drawing attention to the challenges they encountered along the way. It begins with an examination of why families searched for child care. Then, it summarizes how families searched for care. Finally, it concludes by describing the outcomes of these searches.

Exhibit 1. Topics and Data Sources Included in this Brief

Topic	Child Care Search Questions	Survey	Focus Groups
Why caregivers searched for care	When was the last time you looked for a new child care arrangement?	◆	
	What were your primary reasons for searching for child care?	◆	◆
How caregivers searched for care	How did you approach the child care search? What methods did you use? How useful were these methods?	◆	◆
	Was there anyone who helped you during your search?		◆
Search outcomes	What were your experiences with searching for child care? How did it go for you?		◆



KEY FINDINGS: Caregiver experiences searching for child care

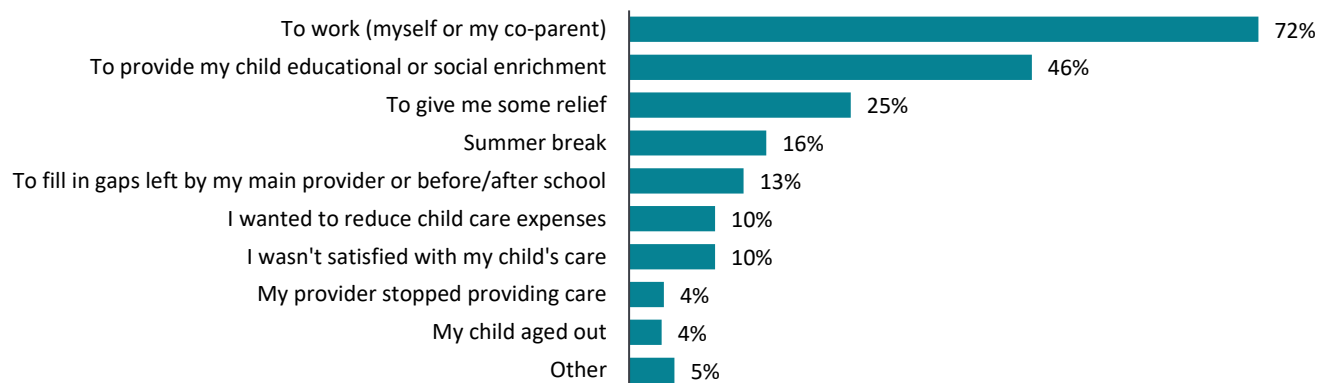
- The main reason caregivers looked for child care arrangements was so they could work.
- Caregivers expressed a need for more up-to-date, consolidated search options to find information about availability, hours of operation, child care quality, and cost.
- Caregivers often relied on informal sources such as friends, social media, and local parenting groups to fill information gaps.
- Caregivers expressed frustration with long waitlists and the time-consuming nature of the child care search.
- About half of families who searched for care could not find it—this rate was higher for those experiencing financial instability.

Why Caregivers Searched for Care

Caregivers' decisions to search for child care often stemmed from a variety of practical reasons, such as the necessity to balance work and family responsibilities. However, not all caregivers actively sought child care. This section explores the motivations and patterns behind caregivers' search for child care, highlighting the different factors that shaped their experiences.

Most caregivers looked for child care so they could work. Most caregivers (75%) surveyed searched for child care at some point for their youngest child. As shown in Exhibit 2, about three-quarters (72%) of these caregivers reported searching for child care so they could work. As one caregiver told us during the focus groups, *“No daycare, no job. It’s that simple.”*

Exhibit 2. The Main Reasons Why Caregivers Searched for Child Care for Their Youngest Child



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey ($n = 1,078$). Respondents were instructed to select 'all that apply', so percentages do not add up to 100%. Only those respondents who previously searched for child care were asked this question.

Many caregivers (46%) also looked to child care as an opportunity for their children to experience educational or social enrichment. Caregivers in the focus groups emphasized that they believed these skills were important for preparing their children to enter kindergarten. As one caregiver told us, *“It’s better for them because they interact with other kids of other ages, and they come prepared to come to school. They’re learning. It’s not just child care.”*

Results from the survey also show that one-quarter (25%) of caregivers looked for child care as a way to get “some relief.” During the focus groups, caregivers shared that having child care in place allowed them opportunities to go to school, run errands, and complete household tasks. One caregiver explained this saying, “I think the positive thing is that we not only have time to work, but also to do other things at home. And what it does is it allows us to do more things, knowing that our children are in good hands.”

Some caregivers never searched for care. About one-quarter (25%) of the caregivers surveyed reported *never wanting a child care arrangement other than parental care*.

Focus group discussions helped illuminate the perspectives of these caregivers. In some cases, caregivers expressed a desire to spend more time with their child to bond and witness developmental milestones.

A few caregivers—especially those with younger children who were pre-verbal—worried about the safety of putting their child in a care arrangement and preferred to provide care themselves.

Other caregivers reported that putting their child into child care was simply not financially practical for their family. They noted that it did not make sense to put their child in care if the cost was as high or higher than their income.

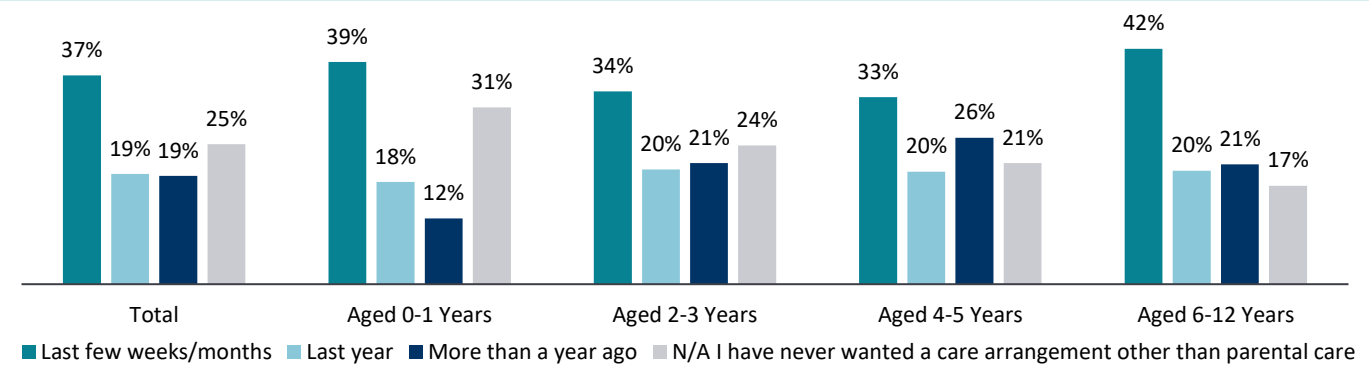
“...growing up, both my parents worked two jobs and everything, so I was pretty much like babysitters, latchkey. So, the fact that I was able to be there from the very beginning was really nice. I totally was grateful for that.”

“I would see little different things on the news about daycares, people mistreating kids, daycares with cameras, and this, and that. It just made me really, really nervous. So, I did not do childcare for neither one of my children.”

“I would have ended up paying more to get it to work than I was making. So, I took about a year and a half off.”

Many caregivers continued to search for child care as their children aged. As shown in Exhibit 3 below, more than a third of the caregivers we surveyed (37%) had wanted to start a new arrangement in the “*last few weeks or months*”. Another fifth (19%) had wanted to start a new care arrangement in the past year. These patterns were consistent even as children grew older, suggesting that many Massachusetts parents continue to struggle with finding or maintaining suitable child care arrangements that work well for their child and family.

Exhibit 3. The Last Time Caregivers Wanted to Start a New Child Care Arrangement for Their Youngest Child



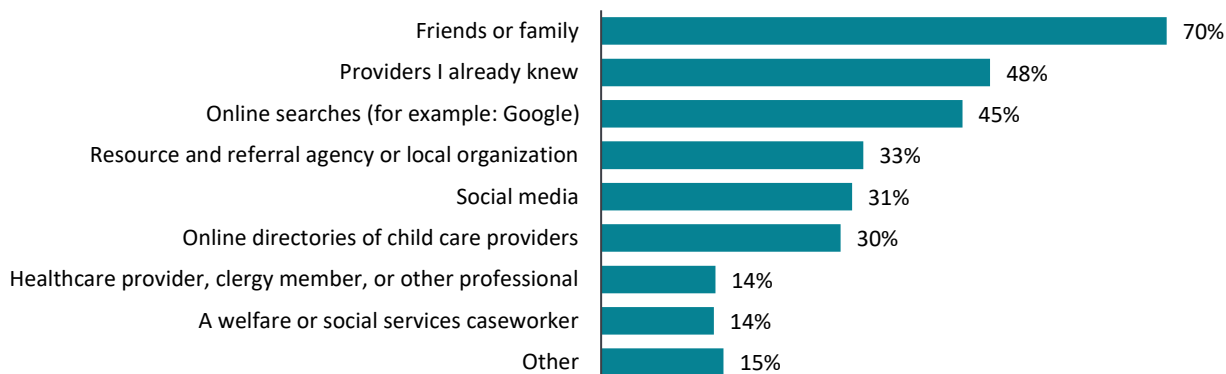
Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey (n=1,431).

How Caregivers Searched for Care

This section examines the approaches caregivers used to conduct their search, the obstacles they faced, and the factors that helped make searching easier and more successful for some caregivers.

Most caregivers used online search tools and informal networks. As shown in Exhibit 4, most caregivers who took the survey (70%) reported searching for child care through informal networks such as friends and family. Many caregivers also looked for information online using search engines like Google (45%), social media (31%), and online directories of child care providers (30%).

Exhibit 4. Approaches Taken by Caregivers to Search for a New Child Care Arrangement



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey ($n = 1,073$). Respondents were instructed to select three responses. Only those respondents who indicated that they had previously searched for child care were asked this question.

Caregivers who searched for new child care arrangements described challenges and successes navigating these searches. The next two sub-sections focus on both, beginning with the challenges.

Challenges with the search process

Caregivers encountered numerous obstacles when searching for child care, often highlighting gaps in resources and support. The process was often time-consuming and further complicated by a limited supply of child care and long waitlists. This section delves into the challenges and the barriers caregivers faced throughout their search.

Caregivers expressed a need for better online search tools. During the focus groups, caregivers shared that they often started their search for child care by using online search tools—such as EEC’s curated *Licensed Child Care Search*,¹ United Ways’ *Mass 211*,² or *Care.com*.³ While they appreciated

"There was no hand-holding--and I'm not asking for hand-holding, but there was like no website [that worked] for me. I'm [typing in] 'child care Cambridge' and you'll get a website: 'Care.com, consider an au pair.'"

"I'm looking [at the list from the EEC website] like, which ones are close to me? Oh, wait, which ones actually still exist? Which ones have space? Which ones are good?"

¹ [Geographically-searchable online directory](#) of licensed child care providers administered by EEC.

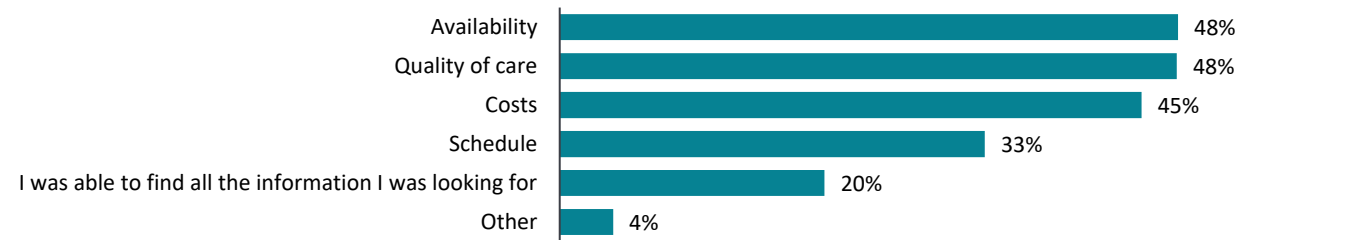
² [Mass 211](#), supported by United Way, offers a hotline and searchable website that Massachusetts residents can use to find essential community services.

³ [Care.com](#) is a for-profit search engine that lists child care providers who have signed up for the service.

the idea that these sites were attempting to offer a centralized source of information, they perceived the sites to be limited. Caregivers consistently expressed a desire for online search tools that include essential information such as open slots, hours of operation, cost, quality ratings, and current waitlist status. They also shared feeling overwhelmed by long lists presented to them in their search—especially caregivers living in urban areas with more care options. Finally, other caregivers expressed frustration that the lists were sometimes outdated and included centers that had closed.

Most caregivers needed more information during their search for a new child care provider. As shown in Exhibit 5, only 20% reported being able to find all the information they were looking for. Providers commonly expressed a need for more information about a variety of topics, including availability, quality, cost, and schedule—information that is not consistently provided through online search tools or child care provider websites.

Exhibit 5. Information Caregivers Wanted When Searching for Child Care, But Was Hard to Find



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey (*n* = 1,078). Respondents were instructed to select 'all that apply', so percentages do not add up to 100%. Only those respondents who previously searched for child care were asked this question.

Caregivers found the search to be time-consuming. Many caregivers reported feeling burdened by the child care search process. They described having to contact many providers to find an option that would work for their family, costing them time and frustration. Caregivers felt additional frustration when they experienced “ghosting,” in which they would call child care providers and not hear back from them.

Caregivers described limited supply and long waitlists. Most caregivers felt like the supply of child care options in their area was insufficient to meet demand. Caregivers told stories about being on multiple waitlists—often since pregnancy or for multiple years. Some caregivers even reported having to pay fees to hold their spot on a waitlist. These experiences validate other EEC-funded research that suggests there are too few licensed slots for the number of children who need care—particularly for infants and toddlers.⁴

“I literally spent a part-time job’s worth when I was home with the kids, just trying to find out if places were open and would take us.”

“There’s not enough daycare options at all. There’s hundreds of people on waiting lists all the time. ... it’s a real crisis.”

“I started getting her on waitlists when she was three or four months old, didn’t hear from anybody until she was almost three years old, and was, like, always calling to update the, you know, ‘are we still on the list? Are we still on the list? Another \$20, can you keep us on the list?’”

⁴ Source: *Analysis of Child Care Deserts in Massachusetts* (N.D.). Presentation by Third Sector Intelligence (3Si) for the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care.

While the lack of options was felt by many, these challenges were exacerbated for middle-income families. Because these families were earning too much to be eligible for child care financial assistance (CCFA)⁵ and other means-tested benefits, they often struggled to find care they could afford to pay for out-of-pocket. Even in communities where caregivers reported having a greater number of child care options to choose from, they still felt like there were few to no options that they could afford.

Caregivers living in the Cape and Islands also described being in competition with seasonal residents for these limited child care spots, particularly summer camps. One caregiver shared, *“That’s a big issue down here. I think because of the tourist trade, those camps are geared to people who... can afford \$300 week to send their kids.”*

Caregivers reported limited help from state agencies and child care resource and referral agencies. Caregivers who received CCFA and other services through state agencies such as the Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) and Department of Children and Families (DCF) often reported receiving basic information about child care programs, such as a list of program names and addresses. However, caregivers noted a variety of limitations with the list. For example, some shared that the list was outdated or lacked key information about whether the program accepted CCFA. Interestingly, none of the caregivers we spoke with—even those receiving CCFA—mentioned receiving information or support through one of Massachusetts’ six child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&R).

“I would have expected them to have more of a hand in saying, ‘well, here are the six places that take vouchers, and let me get a referral for you’ or something. And there’s just none of that.”

Successes with the search process

For many caregivers, access to social supports and community-based organizations were critical in the search process. This section explores how these supports helped caregivers navigate the complexities of finding care.

Access to social supports and networks was an asset for caregivers. Caregivers often turned to their personal networks, social media (e.g., Facebook Mom’s groups), and parenting support groups or classes to find child care information. For those caregivers who did not have social supports or networks in place, finding available slots was particularly hard. As one caregiver described in the focus groups, *“If you don’t have friends or a community, you don’t know.”*

Community-based organizations and services were often helpful. Caregivers who were already connected to early childhood supports like Early Intervention (EI), [Family Centers](#), [Coordinated Family and Community Engagement \(CFCE\) programs](#), and home visiting services reported receiving support with their child care search from these programs. This included suggestions about and referrals to specific child care programs. Caregivers also provided examples of how these programs provided them with support in accessing [child care financial assistance](#), such as advocating for them when denied. One caregiver shared: *“For me, it was through Early Intervention. They helped me a lot because my daughter had been at home with me, she was already one year old, and she still used a pacifier. I didn’t qualify for vouchers, they wouldn’t give me any [before EI involvement]. But through [EI], they secured me that spot and got me vouchers.”*

“Because I had a wonderful caseworker and he was able to connect me with all of these resources, DCF ended up being a good thing in my life.”

For more information, see also: Bumgarner, B., Little, S., Rose, J., Thompson, T., Singhal, N., Kennedy, C., Goldberg, J., & Fauth, R. (2025). *Understanding Child Care Deserts in Massachusetts: Case Study Findings from the Early Childhood Needs Assessment*. Prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care.

⁵ Caregivers typically referred to CCFA as “vouchers”. Both terms are used in this brief.

Caregivers who had an established relationship with their caseworker received more support. As noted above, many caregivers who had received CCFA and other services through state agencies like DTA or DCF received minimal or no assistance with their search. However, caregivers who described longer-term and more involved relationships with their DCF and DTA caseworkers appeared to receive more assistance with child care placements than those who did not have established relationships with caseworkers.

Search Outcomes

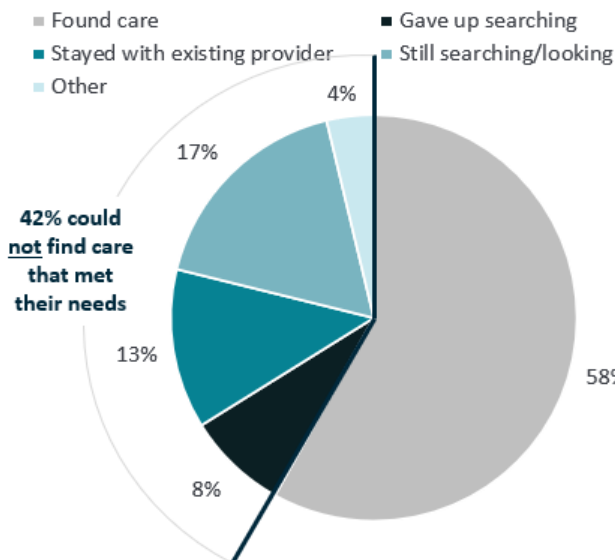
Many caregivers who searched for child care could not find care.

As shown in Exhibit 6, close to half (42%) of caregivers who searched for child care were unable to find care. This included 17% who were still searching or looking, 12% who opted to stay with their existing provider, 8% who gave up searching, and 4% who had another result other than finding care. Caregivers who reported being financially secure reported more success finding care (72%) compared to families who were financially insecure (48%).

When families could not find care, they were left with difficult decisions. For example, some caregivers who preferred center-based care (but could not find it) felt forced to use informal care or stay home with their child. These tough decisions and circumstances are discussed in more detail within Briefs II and III of this series.

Exhibit 6. Result of Caregivers' Search for Child Care

What was the result of your search for child care?



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey ($n=1,069$). Only those respondents who have previously searched for child care were asked this question.

Conclusion

Most caregivers in Massachusetts found the process of searching for child care frustrating and time consuming. Many turned to online tools to find important information that could inform their search. However, they often found these tools to be lacking and turned to informal networks such as friends and family instead. These hurdles were further complicated by a limited supply of child care and long waitlists. Because of these challenges, many caregivers who searched for care were ultimately unable to find care that truly met their families' needs.

To learn more about how caregivers weigh priorities and make decisions during their child care search—we encourage you to visit Brief II in this series, which explores the question, *How do caregivers make decisions about child care?*

ⁱ Sandstrom, H., Kuhns, C., Prendergast, S., Derrick-Mills, T., & Wagner, L.. (2024) [Parental Search and Selection of Child Care and Early Education: A Literature Review](#). OPRE Report 2024-082. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED657258.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2023). *KIDS COUNT® Data Book: State trends in child well-being*. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from <https://assets.aecf.org/m/databook/aecf-2023kidscountdatabook-embargoed.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER) and MEF Associates. (March 2024). *A Document Review to Inform the Family and Workforce Evaluations for the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment*. Internal report prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five.

About this Project

The Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment was launched in 2023 as part of the state's [Preschool Development Grant](#). The needs assessment was conducted by MEF Associates and its partners at Tufts Interdisciplinary Evaluation Research (TIER). The overarching goal was to generate information that could support the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care in improving families' access to high-quality early care and education. The needs assessment was informed by an advisory group that included family representatives and individuals from the B-5 workforce. This group met monthly and provided valuable input on study design, execution, and interpretation of findings.

About this Series

This publication is part of a series that summarizes findings from the needs assessment. The series summarizes findings from a survey and set of focus groups that gathered input from Massachusetts-based caregivers with children up to age 12. This series includes several standalone products, including:



**Introduction
to the Brief Series**



**Brief I: How and why
do caregivers search
for child care?**



**Brief II: How do
caregivers make
decisions about child
care?**



**Brief III: What do
families use for child
care?**



**Technical Appendix
with
Survey Tables**

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