



How do caregivers make decisions about child care?

Findings from the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment

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

Caregivers with young children must consider and balance their priorities and preferences when choosing a child care arrangement for their family. Families may consider factors like safety, quality, location, hours, and cost when selecting a child care arrangement for their family,ⁱ though the way they prioritize these factors varies from family to family.ⁱⁱ However, caregivers often face limited choice, as the child care options available to them may not meet their essential requirements,ⁱⁱⁱ so they may make compromises or tradeoffs.^{iv} Caregivers may not always have the luxury of choosing a child care arrangement that meets all or most of their preferences; this brief seeks to explore the ways in which caregiver preferences factor into the child care decision-making process.

This brief presents findings from the Massachusetts Early Childhood Needs Assessment, which included a survey and set of focus groups with caregivers in 2024. This specific brief explores how caregivers made decisions about child care and early education. As shown in Exhibit 1 below, the needs assessment allowed us to address research questions about caregiver priorities for child care, as well as how caregivers weighed these priorities in the decision-making process. The brief begins by describing the types of child care that caregivers preferred to use. It then explores caregivers’ priorities and how they weighed these priorities to select a child care arrangement.

Exhibit 1. Topics and Data Sources Included in this Brief

Topic	Decision-Making Questions	Survey	Focus Groups
Caregiver Preferences for Care Type	What would your ideal child care type be?	◆	
How Caregivers Weigh Preferences	What mattered most to you when picking a care setting? Which characteristics were most important?	◆	◆
	How did you balance your priorities when choosing care? What tradeoffs did you need to make?		◆

✈️ KEY FINDINGS: Child care decision-making

- Caregivers expressed preferences for a variety of care types in the survey, but center-based care was most common
- Few caregivers felt like they had a real choice when picking child care. Due to a lack of available and affordable care options, focus group respondents described feeling like they had to “take what they could get” as long as it was available, safe, and semi-affordable.

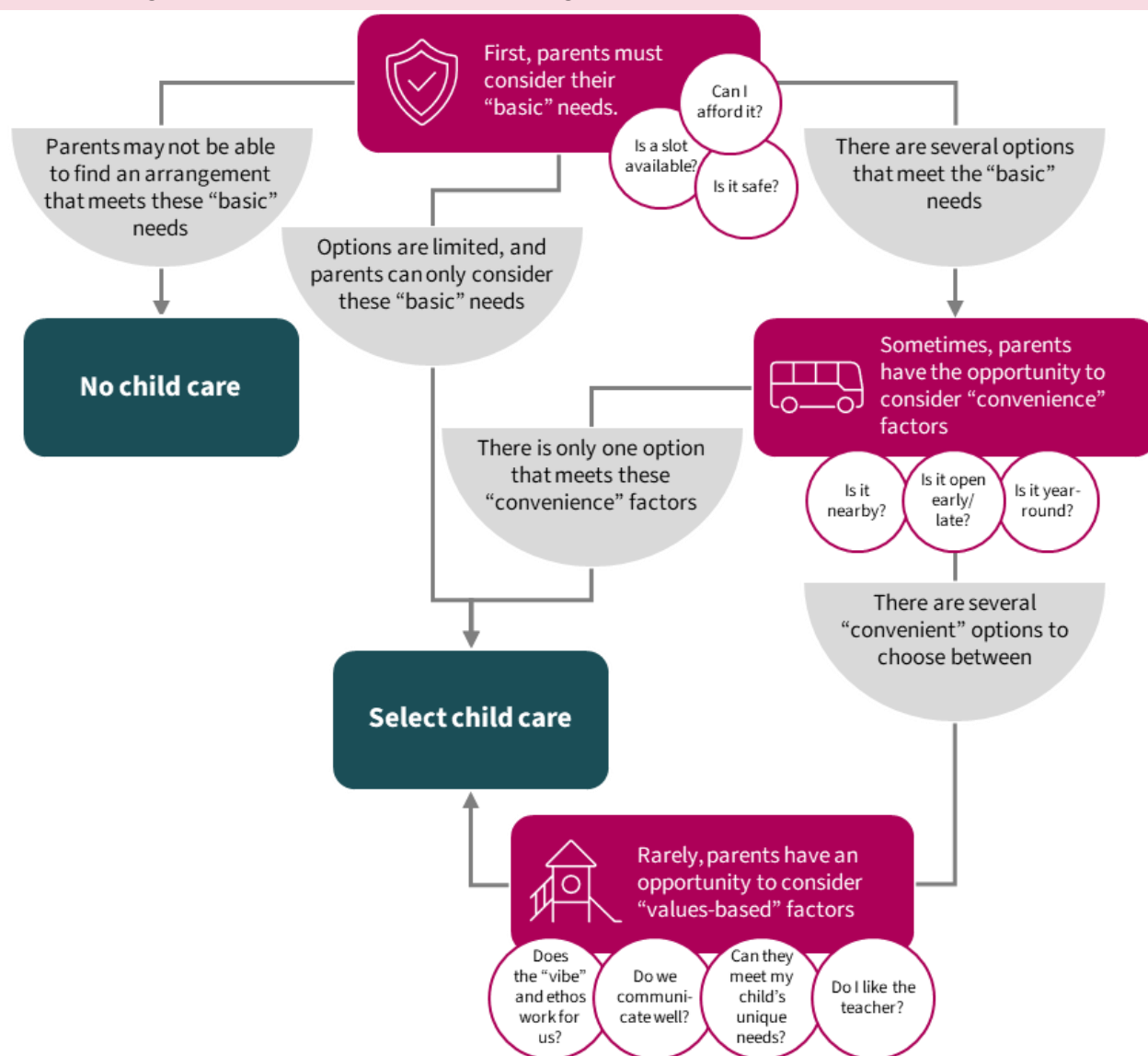


How Caregivers Weigh Preferences

During the focus groups, participants were asked to discuss their priorities when selecting a child care arrangement for their family. These priorities were largely aligned with those that were endorsed by survey participants (see callout boxes below). Focus group participants also discussed *how* they were making decisions around child care arrangements and the tradeoffs they were willing and unwilling to make as they selected arrangements.

Caregivers tended to follow a general pattern when selecting child care arrangements for their family, shown in Exhibit 2. They first considered basic needs, such as affordability and safety of the arrangement. If they found an arrangement that met those needs, they would consider convenience factors, such as the location of the arrangement. Finally, caregivers would consider values-based factors, such as the communication style of the provider, if they were one of the few families who were able to find multiple options that met their higher-priority needs and preferences.

Exhibit 2. Caregivers' Decision Tree When Selecting Child Care





Most families “took what they could get” as long as it met their basic needs of being available, safe, and semi-affordable.

Almost universally, caregivers identified availability as their number one priority when looking for a child care setting. The prevailing sentiment was that “you can’t be picky” and that families needed to accept available slots, even when the setting failed to meet caregivers’ needs and preferences. As one caregiver said, *“Finding a place [with hours that worked] would have been really nice, but I didn’t really have a choice...I’d love to say that other things went into my decision-making process, but it’s really just... this is the only one that had an opening when I needed to go back to work.”*

After availability, the most commonly mentioned priority was physical and psychological safety. Caregivers described looking for child care settings that felt safe; safety was measured by caregivers’ “gut” feelings when visiting the child care, the child care provider’s reputation, and the presence of concrete safety measures (i.e., security cameras). This was particularly pronounced among the caregivers living in lower-income neighborhoods. Some caregivers preferred center-based over family child care because it was perceived as having more regulations and oversight. One caregiver explained why she hadn’t sent her 1-year-old to the child care center they just got into: *“I know that he might need it, but I have a lot of fears since I see a lot of TV news and a lot of this going on out there. Yeah, my biggest fear is going to a daycare, and [he] can’t talk and say anything.”*

Survey Spotlight: When ranking the top 3 operational characteristics that mattered most to them, 78% of caregivers picked safety and 49% picked cost.

Families’ child care decisions were often influenced by what they could afford. While the sentiment of child care being unaffordable was relatively universal among focus group participants, finding affordable care was particularly challenging for families with multiple young children and for families whose income levels tipped them over the “fiscal cliff,” where they made too much money to qualify for child care financial assistance. As one caregiver shared, *“My priorities were something that I could afford, and I looked at a bunch... I knew I probably wasn’t going to be eligible for a voucher... and then I got prices, like \$900 a week, and it was crazy, and I was like yeah, I can’t do that. So, then I ended up going to an in-home person [that I found by] word of mouth.”*



Some families were able to consider convenience factors such as opening hours and location.

Caregivers expressed a preference for child care arrangements that were proximal to their home or work. Families without access to a car noted the importance of having a provider near public transportation, or, ideally, having transportation provided by the center: *“For us it was the distance, how far it is from our home. We didn’t want to be traveling, like stuck in traffic during the snow time and peak hours. So, we just chose for something that was right next to the building that we were in...And it wasn’t the best daycare...”*

Survey Spotlight: When ranking the top 3 operational characteristics that mattered most to them, 40% of caregivers picked location and 36% picked operating hours.

Most caregivers expressed a strong preference for longer opening hours, including early morning (i.e., before 8:00am) and/or late afternoon (i.e., after 3:00pm) hours that would help them better meet their work obligations. For example, a caregiver shared, *“Everybody closes at 3:00, 4:00, 4:30. I mean, I get that it’s great for*

the kids. I work till 6:00. So, for me, this has been an endless juggle of managing to figure out how to continue my workday...”

The majority of caregivers also expressed a need for options that remained open throughout the year. This was especially pronounced among families who were working full-time and not eligible for free or subsidized programs during school vacation weeks and summers.



While only a handful of families had the opportunity to select a provider according to values-based factors, almost all caregivers had a “wish list” of qualities they would look for in a provider.

Most caregivers mentioned the importance of curriculum and approach, though specific preferences appeared to differ slightly by economic status of participants. Caregivers from lower-income communities expressed a desire for a stronger emphasis on early math and literacy and voiced some anxiety about whether their child would get what they needed to be prepared for school. One caregiver—a child care teacher herself—*noted, “I always look to see if a program is accredited by NAEYC. They just kind of set a higher standard in terms of curriculum development and structure in the program.”* Caregivers from higher-income communities, however, appeared to place more emphasis on social emotional learning. As one caregiver shared, *“I felt like [at current care arrangement] it was just, like, more about play and, you know, imagination and all that kind of good stuff and not ‘We’re going to learn about bugs this week’ or something.”*

Survey Spotlight: When ranking the top 2 opportunities for child development that mattered most to them, 73% said opportunities to ‘learn social and emotional skills’ and 54% said opportunities to ‘play and explore’.

Many caregivers expressed the importance of having open lines of communication with their child’s provider to hear updates and have an opportunity to coordinate on goals. Most caregivers whose children were in a formal setting reported fairly positive experiences with communication, appreciating providers’ use of multiple communication mechanisms throughout the day (e.g., texting, paperwork, ClassDojo): *“I feel like the communication here is so wonderful...it’s not like they’re incessantly texting or messaging on the app, but I get to see what my child is doing throughout the day...I just love the communication and it’s important for me. Huge.”* Caregivers whose children were in centers with poor communication noted how anxiety-provoking it was to not know what their child was doing all day—particularly when children were non-verbal.

Many caregivers emphasized the importance of teacher experience, qualifications, and disposition. Although caregivers from across income groups emphasized the importance of having providers who had warm and caring dispositions and shared their parenting values, caregivers from the higher-income communities more consistently named these features as a high priority. One caregiver explained, *“I want something that aligns with my parental values...as much as I can. My husband and I, we practice—I forget the exact terms for it—but, like, peaceful parenting. We’re firm, but we go together with our child on things. We try to support them, not yell at them, you know, and we want an environment that would reflect a similar style...”* Caregivers living in lower-income communities tended to emphasize the importance of credentials and were sometimes concerned that the more affordable options were staffed by less qualified-teachers: *“Then they have people that*

Survey Spotlight: When ranking the top 2 provider characteristics that mattered most to them, 73% of caregivers picked ‘supportive and engaging’ providers and 68% said providers who had qualifications or experience.

are not even old enough, so it's like the accreditation. Like, are you old enough? Are you a teacher? Are you certified?"

Finally, several caregivers noted how important it was to have staff stability. One caregiver said, *"I wanted to get a sense when we visited it that people like, wanted to be there, like the staff, like had been there for some time and like were committed to the place and it wasn't just going to be like some rotating cast every day my daughter would have to adjust to some new person."*

Caregivers also looked for care arrangements that could provide individualized attention and care. Caregivers who had children with special health or behavioral needs wanted care arrangements that could serve those needs. For some caregivers, they preferred public school settings, which they perceived as better equipped to provide accommodations. Most caregivers of children with special needs noted how difficult it was to find providers that had training and experience working with children like theirs. One caregiver shared these worries: *"I've seen what people who aren't trained to deal with neurodivergent children, how they deal with them, and I don't want that for my daughter. I need someone to understand, her stimming, her tics..."*

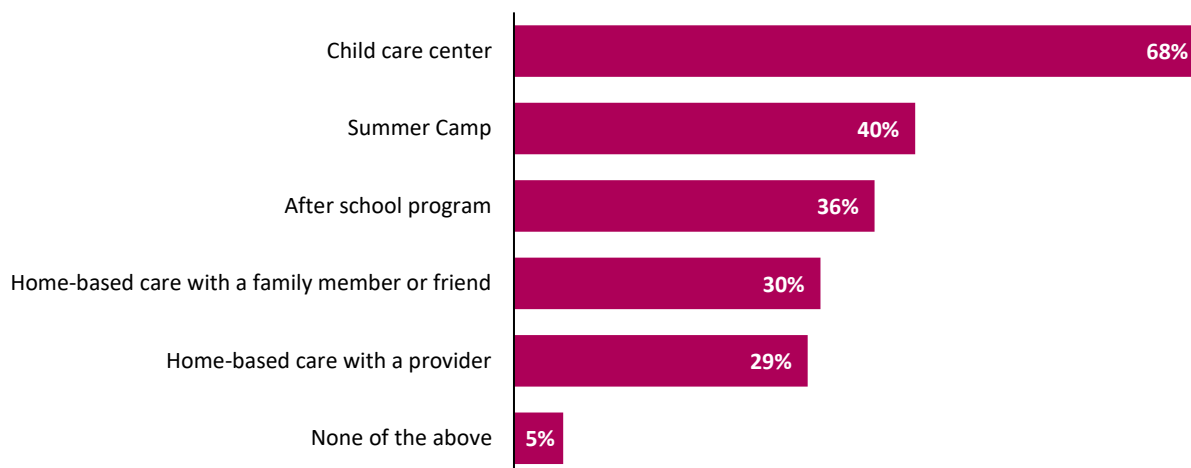
Caregiver Preferences for Care Type

When describing their decision-making process in the focus groups, many caregivers also mentioned preferences for specific types of child care:

- For some caregivers, care type preferences emerged as a response to meeting their **basic needs**. For example, some families preferred center-based care because it was perceived as being a safer option than home-based child care. Alternatively, some families preferred care with a family member or friend because it was a more affordable option than center-based care.
- For other families, care type preferences emerged as they considered **convenience factors**. For example, some families preferred care with a family member or friend because the hours aligned better with their work schedules, whereas centers might only be open half the day or closed on weekends.
- Families also considered the **values-based factors** that different child care types offered. For example, some caregivers felt that family child care and care from a family member or friend offered an experience like being at home. Others preferred center-based and family child care options over family and friend care because they preferred the curriculum and structure that formal care provides.

The survey also provides insight into caregiver preferences for different types of child care. Specifically, caregivers were asked, *"If child care was free for your youngest child, where would you enroll them?"* As shown in Exhibit 3 below, caregivers indicated a variety of preferences, though center-based care stood out as being the most popular. Additional analyses suggest that caregiver preferences for center-based care held true even when caregivers had infants and toddlers.

Exhibit 3. Caregivers' Child Care Type Preferences



Notes: This exhibit presents findings from the family survey question (n = 1,419), "If child care was free for your youngest child, where would you enroll them?" Respondents could select up to three responses. If respondents selected 'None of the above,' they could not select any additional options. All eligible respondents (n=1,446) were asked this question.

Conclusion

Caregivers expressed a variety of preferences and priorities for the types of child care they preferred. They often had to prioritize basic needs such as safety, affordability, and availability over other preferences, such as location, operating hours, and values-based qualities.

Though caregivers seemed to have clear ideas about the type and characteristics of child care they wanted for their family, many ultimately had to make compromises given the lack of options. Although caregivers consistently expressed a desire for safe, high quality, convenient care, very few families got to choose a child care arrangement based on these criteria given the limited availability and unaffordability of options.

To learn more about the type of child care that families used after weighing priorities and making a decision—we encourage you to visit Brief III in this series, which explores the question, *What do families use for child care?*

ⁱⁱ 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. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED657258.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Forry, N. D., Tout, K., Rothenberg, L., Sandstrom, H., Vesely, C. (2013). *Child care decision-making literature review*. OPRE Brief 2013-45. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/child_care_decision_making_literature_review_pdf_version_v2.pdf

^{iv} Smith, L. & Owens, V. (2023). *The illusion of parent choice: Lessons learned from BPC's parent survey series*. Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/BPC_ECI-Parent-Report_R04.pdf

^v Savage, S.A. & Robeson, W.W. (2025). Child care tradeoffs among Massachusetts mothers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 71, 104-113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.12.005>

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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