Factors that Influence Families' Search for Child Care and Early Education

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Key Findings

▶ Various factors influence families' search for child care and early education (CCEE). These factors can be grouped into four dimensions of access: reasonable effort to find CCEE, affordability, meets parents' needs, and supports child development.

▶ All states provide a consumer education website to help inform families' child care search, but families may have difficulty finding and navigating these sites. Improvements to states' consumer education website can better promote equitable access[a] to information.

Introduction

What do we know about families' reasons for searching for child care and early education (CCEE) and what facilitates or hinders their search? For most families, the process of finding and paying for child care is challenging. Families ultimately select child care arrangements that accommodate their unique circumstances, family values and culture and constraints related to income, employment, family composition, transportation, and availability of child care options in their community.[1,2]

Searching for CCEE can be easier if more information is readily available to help families find the provider that fits best with their needs. States have recently developed consumer education websites as a result of statutory changes under the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). These websites facilitate searching for CCEE by providing information about child care assistance, licensing, and quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), and by offering a searchable list of CCEE providers. However, families are not always aware of state resources that could inform their child care search.[3] States therefore need to consider the information they offer on their consumer education websites and how to best reach families with this information.

This highlight draws key findings from two reports focused on families' search for child care and states' efforts to provide parents with consumer education to help inform their child care search process:

Parents' Reasons for Searching for Early Care and Education and Results of Search: An Analysis Using the Access Framework

Supporting Families' Access to Child Care and Early Education: A Descriptive Profile of States' Consumer Education Websites

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[a] A focus on equitable access emphasizes the importance of understanding and addressing CCEE experiences across families from multiple geographic areas as well as racial/ethnic, language, and income groups.

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Child Care and Early
Education Policy and
Research Analysis

While the research on families' selection of a CCEE arrangement is broad, we highlight recent findings from two reports that focus on families' search for CCEE, which use a family-centered definition of access. The access definition is informed by literature on child care decision-making and includes four interrelated dimensions: "with *reasonable effort*, all families can find and use *affordable* care that *meets the family's[b] needs and supports their children's development.*"[4] See the Access Framework brief and the full [Access Guidebook](#) for more information about the access definition. Findings from these two reports offer insights to inform state CCEE consumer education efforts.

Families' Reasons for Searching for CCEE

Analyses of data from the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Household Survey highlights families'[c] experiences searching for CCEE. Families' main reasons for searching for care were grouped into the following dimensions of access: 1) meets parents' needs, such as care that could accommodate a families' work schedule; 2) supports child development, such as care that enhances a child's educational and social development; 3) affordability or wanting to reduce child care costs; or 4) other.[d] Key findings include:

- Almost half (46%) of all families reporting about a child under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, searched for care in the past two years.

- More families from households with higher incomes (at or above 200% of the federal poverty line) searched for care compared to families from households with lower incomes (below 200% of the federal poverty line) (51% vs 41%).

- The majority of families (66%) reported searching for care mainly to help meet families' needs, while 30% reported searching for care mainly to support child development.[5] See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Reasons for searching for care, categorized into the Access Framework dimensions
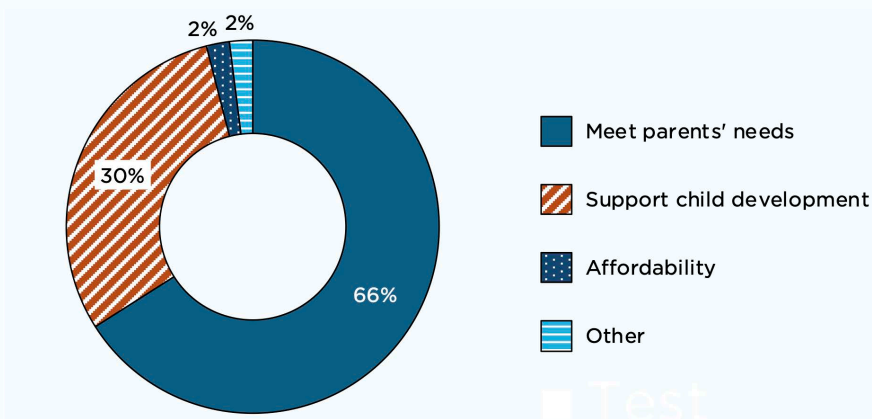
Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey; adapted from Hill, Z., Bali, D., Gebhart, T., Schaefer, C., & Halle, T. (2021). *Parents' reasons for searching for care and results of search: An analysis using the Access Framework.* OPRE Report #2021–39. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. **Note.** Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey.

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[b] The access definition refers only to parents, but this publication uses the term *families* to reflect a more inclusive view of household CCEE needs and decision making.
[c] The NSECE Household Survey was conducted with a parent or guardian of a child or children under age 13.
[d] None of the main reasons for searching for care fit into the reasonable effort dimension of access.

- Families' main reasons for searching for care differed by their household income and child's age:

  o Families from households with lower incomes (below 200% of the federal poverty line), regardless of the age of their child, were more likely to report meeting parents' needs as the main reason they searched for care compared to supporting child development. In contrast, families from households with higher incomes (at or above 200% of the federal poverty line) were more likely to report searching for care to meet parents' needs only if their child was younger (48% households with higher incomes compared to 39% of households with lower incomes).

  o Families with younger children (<36 months) were four times as likely to report searching for care mainly to meet parents' needs than to support child development (77% vs. 19%); while parents with older children (36–72 months, not yet in kindergarten) were more evenly distributed in their main reasons for searching. See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Percentage of parents who report searching for care to support child development or to meet parents' needs, by age of child
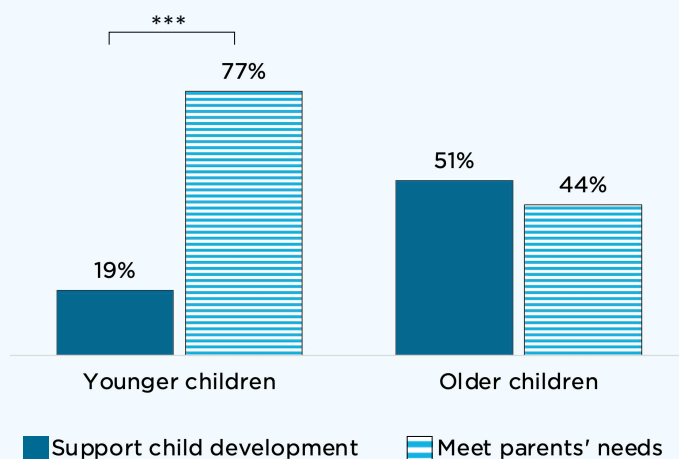
Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey; adapted from Hill, Z., Bali, D., Gebhart, T., Schaefer, C., & Halle, T. (2021). *Parents' reasons for searching for care and results of search: An analysis using the Access Framework.* OPRE Report #2021–39. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. **Note.** Estimates for parents whose responses were in the categories of Affordability and Other are not displayed in this figure due to small sample sizes; Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36–72 months, not yet in kindergarten). * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

# Information States Provide to Inform Families' Search for CCEE

To better understand states' recent efforts to provide consumer education to families to inform their child care search, a descriptive study explored the types of consumer education information available on states' CCEE related websites (i.e., states' child care consumer education website, QRIS website, and child care search engines).[e] The study found:

- All states have a child care consumer education website as required under CCDF. However, states may have multiple websites that families need to navigate to find CCEE-related information (i.e., an official child care consumer education website, a child care search tool,

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[e] Information for this report was collected from a review of states' CCEE consumer education websites in all 50 states and the District of Columbia in the summer of 2020, The review did not include territories.

and a QRIS website). Six states (CO, GA, ID, ME, MN, NM) have integrated these websites into a single website, which likely makes it easier for families to find information. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Connections between state consumer education, QRIS and child care search websites
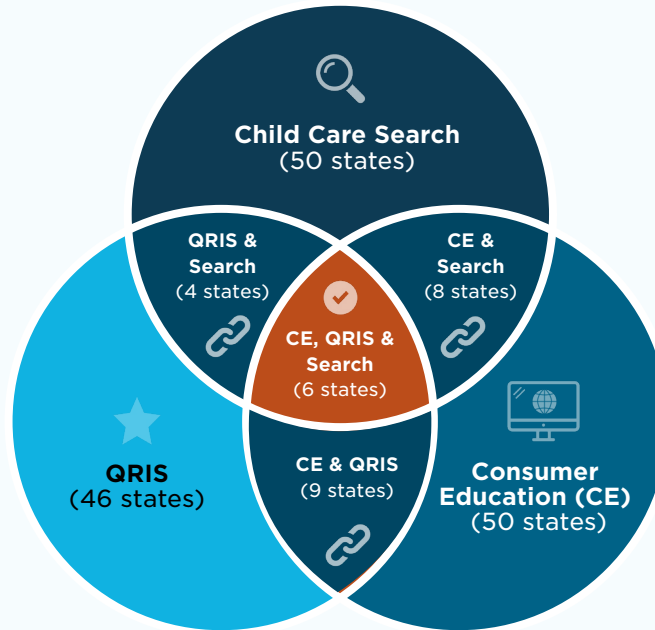
Source: Child Trends' analysis of childcare.gov website linkages as of 08/2020; adapted from Banghart, P., Hill, Z., Guerra, G. Covington, D., and Tout, K. (2021). *Supporting families' access to child care and early education: A descriptive profile of states' consumer education websites.* OPRE Report #2021-161. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

- States' consumer education websites commonly provided information about the availability of child care subsidies to help families who are eligible find financial assistance to afford care. Most also offered information about quality, including the importance of licensing and quality ratings of providers.

- States' consumer education websites may be difficult for families to find when they search for care online. These websites were found only 17 percent of the time in simulated, local child care searches.[f,6]

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[f] The user experience scan found that of the 10 local searches conducted, using 3 distinct search terms, state-developed consumer education websites only appeared in the first page of results for 5 of the 30 searches. In the vast majority of local child care searches, advertisements by privately-funded child care search websites appeared most frequently.

In order to better understand families' access to information provided through consumer education websites, the types of information and website features included were grouped into the four dimensions of access: reasonable effort, or whether the state had integrated at least two of their CCEE websites; affordability, such as information about child care assistance or publicly-funded CCEE programs; supports child development, such as information about a states' QRIS; and meets parents' needs, such as whether a family could search for certain types of providers or by a certain location. Eight states (CO, FL, GA, MI, MN, RI, TX, WA) had information and/or website features across all four of the access categories.

Considerations for State CCEE Leaders

The following strategies can help improve states' online child care consumer education for families:

- **Seek families' feedback on consumer education strategies.** Often, families do not have a voice in state decision-making about child care policies.[7] Analyses of the NSECE data showed that two thirds of parents searched for care to meet their needs (e.g., so that a parent could work or attend school) and about one third reported looking for care mainly to support children's development. Given this, seeking families' input on the usefulness of their consumer education strategies, including the information they include on their websites, to ensure it aligns with families' needs and priorities when they are searching for care could improve families' experiences with these websites. For more information on how states might support consumer education and family engagement, see *Consumer Engagement: Strategies for Engaging Families* from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement.

- **Consider options to improve search engine optimization.** State consumer education websites are not always easily found. Additional search engine optimization (SEO) could help improve the ranking of states' consumer education websites. Only 5 states reported in their 2019-2021 CCDF state plans[g] that they were utilizing SEO. On-page and off-page design strategies can improve the likelihood that families will find state websites when they are searching for care.

- **Integrate or better link CCEE information websites.** Combining websites, when possible, to provide one place for families to go to find information is ideal. If that is not possible, including easy-to-find links between websites may help families find the information they need during their search for CCEE.

- **Ensure information provided through states' consumer education website(s) address each dimension of access:**

  1. Reasonable effort: information is easy to find.

  2. Affordability: includes information about reduced cost or free/public CCEE.

  3. Supports child development: includes information about what influences the quality of CCEE and considerations for selecting a high quality program.

  4. Meet parents' needs: child care search meets families' needs, such as searching for care during non-traditional hours or for caregivers who speak the same language as the family.

According to the descriptive study of consumer education, states generally employ many search engine features to help families find care that meets their needs. However, the ability to search for Head Start/Early Head Start programs through the states' consumer education websites was less common[h] and only one state allowed families to search for Tribal providers.

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[g] These were the most recent CCDF plans available at the time of review for the consumer education descriptive study.
[h] Families can search for Head Start and Early Head Start programs by location through the Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

Moreover, less than half of states' CCEE search engines allowed families to search for care based on a program's hours of operation. Given that employment hours and schedules can often be a barrier to finding care, adding a search filter for hours of operation would help families search for CCEE that meet their needs to cover hours of employment. While the 2016 CCDF Final Rule requires states to have a list of child care providers searchable by ZIP code, this scan of child care search engines suggests that states could further meet families' needs by expanding the number of search features available in the search engine. Using key search filter options on consumer education websites could be especially beneficial.

- **Examine the reach and effectiveness of CCEE consumer education strategies through website analytics.** In addition to seeking direct feedback from families on their state consumer education strategies, website analytics can help states understand the reach or efficacy of their online consumer education strategies. This data can help them understand which strategies have the greatest reach and which types of information are used most by families when they are searching for care.[8]

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[8] Ibid.

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