

**National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies**

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# What Do Parents Think About Child Care?

Findings From A Series Of Focus Groups



## About NACCRRA

NACCRRA is the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, made up of more than 800 child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) located in every state and most communities across the United States. CCR&R agencies help families, child care providers, and communities find, provide, and plan for affordable, quality child care.

Since 1987, NACCRRA has been working to improve the system of early learning for children by:

- ▶ Providing training, resources, and best practices standards to local and state CCR&Rs that support high quality, accountable services;
- ▶ Promoting national policies and partnerships that facilitate universal access to quality child care.

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# Introduction

Almost 12 million children under age 5 in the United States—that’s 63 percent of the nation’s children under 5—are in some type of child care arrangement every week, and more than 6 million of them are in the care of someone other than a relative. On average, children under age 5 spend more than 30 hours a week in child care. Children of working mothers spend almost 40 hours a week in these arrangements.

Child care allows families to earn more than one income—which is economically what many families need to even survive. In today’s world, mom’s earnings matter, as her income could account for more than half the income

in families who earn under \$60,000 annually. This makes child care a critical need for most families with children.

Research on the brain has, also, proven that the first years of life are crucial for intellectual, social and general development. As more than six in 10 children are cared for regularly by someone other than their parents, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) conducted a series of focus groups to better understand what parents look for when they select child care, the difficulties they experience, and compromises they make, and what in their minds constitutes quality care.

## The key findings from these groups were:

- ▶ Finding child care that is **reliable and affordable** is very difficult.
- ▶ Parents would like to place their children in child care programs where they can **learn new skills** through activities and interaction with other children in a **clean, safe and loving environment**.
- ▶ In many places, even if parents can afford it, **quality child care is just not available** to them.
- ▶ According to parents, the federal government, local communities, parents, policy-makers and scholars in the field should all **work together to improve the quality of child care** in the United States.
- ▶ Parents **assume that child care programs are inspected** for health and safety standards, and that caregivers receive basic training before working with children, when the **reality is otherwise**.
- ▶ Parents think that **standards for child care**, such as health and safety standards, and the training of caregivers, should be **mandated federally and enforced locally**.





## Who Did NACCRRRA Talk To?

In August and September 2005, NACCRRRA conducted 14 focus groups in seven locations across the country with parents on child care issues. NACCRRRA spoke to 163 parents of varied economic and ethnic or racial backgrounds, who mainly had children under age 8. Some of the groups were comprised only of parents of children aged 0 to 24 months. The groups were conducted primarily in English, except for the groups with Hispanic parents (which were conducted in Spanish). Table 1 shows the locations and the composition of each group.

More than eight in 10 of the focus group participants were women, reflecting the predominant role women still play in child rearing. An effort was made, therefore, to include fathers in the discussion by recruiting one group in Indianapolis that was a fathers-only group. In a few cases, fathers accompanied their wives in some of the other groups. For instance, the American-Indian group in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, was almost double the size shown on page 4, as more than half the participants came as a couple, even though only one of them had been invited to participate. The median age of the participants was 31 years.

About two-thirds of the participants were full-time working parents, approximately two in 10 worked part-time, and almost one-quarter

reported that they were students. Some of these parents combined multiple jobs, or worked and attended school at the same time. Juggling the demands of multiple workplaces, school and raising children causes a good deal of stress, and the issue of child care is a crucial everyday issue in their lives.

While, slightly more than half the participants were married, three in 10 were single parents and slightly more than one in 10 reported being separated or divorced with sole custody of their children. Efforts were made to include single parents in the discussion by convening a group in Boston that consisted only of single parents. None of these single parents in the group had a four-year college degree and half of them reported making less than \$20,000 annually, even though almost all of them either worked full-time, part-time, were a student, or did a combination of the three. **The majority of these single parents – eight in 10 – did not receive any governmental assistance for child care and most had placed their children in unregulated care.**

Efforts were also made to represent the various races and ethnicities in the United States. NACCRRRA conducted one focus group each with African-American parents, Asian parents, Ameri-

**Table 1: Group Location and Composition**

Location	Number of Participants	Group Composition
Boston, MA Group 1	11	Low-income parents with children under 8 years
Boston, MA Group 2	10	Single parents with children 0-24 months
Indianapolis, IN Group 1	12	Parents with children under 8 years
Indianapolis, IN Group 2	13	Fathers with children under 8 years
Washington, DC Group 1	7	Hispanic parents with children under 8 years
Washington, DC Group 2	13	African-American parents with children under 8 years
Oakland, CA Group 1	13	Asian parents with children under 8 years
Oakland, CA Group 2	13	Parents with children under 8 years
Bartlesville, OK, Group 1*	14	Low-income parents with children 0-24 months
Bartlesville, OK Group 2*	10	American Indian parents with children under 8 years
Pittsboro, NC Group 1*	15	Low-income Hispanic parents with children 0-24 months
Pittsboro, NC Group 2*	12	Parents with children under 8 years
San Antonio, TX Group 1	12	Hispanic parents with children under 8 years
San Antonio, TX Group 2	8	Military parents with children under 8 years
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\* Denotes rural areas

can-Indian parents and three focus groups with Hispanic parents. The African-American parents' group, conducted in Washington, D.C., mainly consisted of single mothers with high-school education making less than \$35,000 a year, with slightly more than one-third reporting they were unemployed. Half the American-Indian parents and almost six in 10 of the Hispanic parents and almost six in 10 of the Asian parents were married. A majority of participants in these racial/ethnic groups reported household incomes of less than \$35,000, even though most of them were fully employed. Asian mothers were the exception, with none of them working full-time - they reported working part-time, were students, or were not in the labor force.

Additionally, NACCRRRA recruited participants based on educational and income guidelines so that they were roughly representative of the areas in which the focus groups were conducted. Parents earning low incomes are, however, over-represented in these groups, as NACCRRRA conducted several focus groups targeting them (see Table 1 above).



## The Need for Child Care:

The last 30 years have shown a substantial increase in labor force participation by women with children. Currently, only 23 percent of families with children younger than 6 have a parent who is not in the labor force.<sup>6</sup> With working mothers making ever greater contributions to household incomes, access to child care has become an essential work support for families.

But, while parents largely agreed that working mothers were “under-valued,” “under-appreciated,” tired, over-exhausted, or stressed, some mothers felt they were criticized for working. As one Indianapolis mother said: “Not respected. Why aren’t you there 24/7 with your child?” “Heavily criticized,” said another mother in Pittsboro, NC. Still, even religious conservatives, who believe that the family suffers when a woman has a full-time job, are more likely than average to be in dual-earner families.<sup>8</sup> This indicates that even two-parent families, who believe having a stay-at-home parent is the best option, in reality may not be able to afford to support a stay-at-home parent.

As one parent in San Antonio said: “We come from a day and age that we need to have more than one income. The family is better off. If you can afford to do it, it’s picture perfect.” A few mothers said they would “love to” be stay-at-home moms or “we need more of them” or that

**Over the last 30 years, labor force participation by women with children has increased substantially.**

- ▶ In 1975, 40 percent of women with children younger than 6 held a paid job. In 2004, 62.2 percent of women with children under 6 were in the workforce.<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ Currently, 70.7 percent of women with children work.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ Three out of four working mothers work more than 30 hours per week.<sup>3</sup>
- ▶ In 2002, over half of American women with a child under age 1 were in the labor force.<sup>4</sup>
- ▶ By 2001, 60 percent of children under age 6 were in some type of child care arrangement each week.<sup>5</sup>

it was the “most important job,” but most did not see that as an option for themselves.

Almost half the focus group participants said that they had considered stay-at-home parenting, but decided not to do so. **The most common reason, given by more than nine in 10 of these parents, was that they could not afford to be stay-at-home parents.** As one African-American mother in Washington, D.C., said, “[I could not be a stay-at-home mother] because of the economic situation in the house, although I know it is neglectful to the baby.” A mother in Oklahoma echoed her views – “someone has to pay the bills.” Single parents, especially, cannot afford to stay at home. As one single mother in Boston put it, “I am head of household. If I don’t work, we have no home.”

But many mothers associated being a stay-at-home parent with a lower status in society. “They are not anything in society,” said one Boston mother. “Under-appreciated,” “low self-esteem,” and “poor” were other words and phrases associated with being a stay-at-home mom, even as others used words such “under-appreciated,” “heroes,” and “hard-workers” to describe them.

Hispanic mothers were more likely to associate low self-esteem with being a stay-at-home mom. A Hispanic mother, in Pittsboro, NC, pointed out: “Some people are home, not for ignorance but since they just came [from another country] they don’t find the support of their husbands or people who help them know the area. I know people that are like that. They can’t go out to work because they don’t know how to drive and they don’t know how to go and ask for an application. Because the husband says no, “this is a stage where I work and we are okay” . . . They themselves (stay-at-home moms) tell themselves that “they can’t.””

Many parents felt that they needed to go to work in order to set an example for their children and that child care was a place where their children could learn and develop. As one African-American parent in Washington, D.C., said: “I like to be outside the house working to set a good example.” Others thought that being around other children benefited their children. “I think my son can learn more and get friends in child care,” said one Boston mother. Another parent in Oklahoma said: “Children need to interact with other children to learn.”

Women’s wages are essential to the economic well-being of their families. “They’re your breadwinners,” said an American-Indian parent in Oklahoma. In 20 to 25 percent of dual-earner families, women are the primary earners.<sup>7</sup> For families with children under age 5 where the mother is employed and income is less than \$18,000 per year, the mother’s income was 90 percent of household income. For families with children under age 5 with employed mothers and income between \$18,000 and \$36,000, the mother’s income was two-thirds of household income (66.5 percent). For families with children under age 5 with employed mothers and income between \$36,000 and \$60,000, the mother’s income was more than half of the household income (53 percent).



## So, What Do Parents Think About Child Care in General?

Parents associate the words “necessary,” “expensive,” “costly,” “frustrating,” and “hard to find” with child care. **Overall, parents thought that child care was costly and that it was difficult to find care that met their quality standards.**

### **Child Care is Costly:**

Parents with children under age 5 are paying, on average, almost 10 percent of their monthly income for child care, and families earning low incomes (less than \$1,500 per month) are spending almost one-quarter of their monthly income on child care.<sup>9</sup> A 1998 national survey found more than half the parents interviewed (51 percent) said finding affordable child care was “extremely” or “very” difficult, and an additional 20 percent found it to be “somewhat difficult.”<sup>10</sup> But as one mother in Boston said: “[It is] necessary for working parents.” This view was echoed by parents across the country in these focus groups. Still, expensive or costly were most often the first words parents associated with child care: “I have a 4-year old and I’m paying out the nose,” said a San Antonio parent. Other parents echoed these feelings:

- ▶ Child care is expensive.
- ▶ Child care that parents are comfortable with is hard to find.

*“Depending on where you look, especially when you pay all this money and you have to bring in the diapers, formula, food and everything you need. Heaven forbid, your work says you have to work two [extra] hours a day, and you call your day care to extend your time and they charge \$1 per minute.”*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX

*“I can’t afford it right now.”*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK

*“Expensive, very expensive.”*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

**Cost is the most important factor in parents' child care decisions.** When asked about child care, more than two-thirds of the parents in the focus groups rated the cost of the child care either as their highest concern or among the top two or three concerns. So, while parents try to find child care that they feel comfortable with, the cost of care could outweigh other considerations.

*"Next to paying our mortgage, that's [child care] the next highest bill in my house. My question is: can I eat while I pay for child care? This is a huge issue for us."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

*"One child care [payment] is more than our rent every month."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK

*"I decided on a center because I loved it: it was in a great location, very clean, great quality. They told me the price and I flew out of there. \$300 a week! Very expensive."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

Hispanic parents in Pittsboro, NC, who mainly earned low incomes, however, were unique in not considering cost while choosing child care. As one mother in this group said: "The cost is not important because when one is working, I have trust that the children will be well taken care of." Most of these parents had their children in licensed family child care, and they emphasized that their children's well-being was primary and that they made other sacrifices to keep their children in child care that they trusted.

*"There are times when we give everything to our children. There are times when we can't, but we try because that is the cost of nature. One doesn't have the necessary [money] to pay for electricity, water, telephone, rent and there are times that is not enough. But you make all the possible [sacrifices] to pay for that amount so your children can be fine."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC (Hispanic group)

*"I think there are times when we don't have money, because it looks like all the parents are working or are going to school. We have to limit ourselves, but we always pay even when we don't have."*

—Another parent in Pittsboro, NC (Hispanic group)

### **Quality Child Care is Hard to Find:**

In addition to the high costs, parents felt that **good child care was difficult to find.** A 1998 national survey reported that 44 percent of parents found it "extremely" or "very" difficult to find quality child care and an additional 30 percent said they found it "somewhat" difficult.<sup>11</sup> Not much seems to have changed in the last seven years. Parents in these focus groups across the country recounted their woes in finding quality child care.

*"Good child care is challenging to find."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

*"You can find a babysitter, but it's hard to find a child care provider who will take care of our kids and not just watch them."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C.

*"It's hard to find a good child care provider that you can trust."*

—Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"Hard to find quality and affordability."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC



## What Do Parents Want in Their Child Care Arrangements?

Parents pointed out that while cost was an important factor in their decision-making, there were other factors they considered when making a choice. As a single mother in Boston said: “Just because you [caregivers] are cheap doesn’t mean I am going to go with you.” A July 2001 survey of parents with children under age 6 found that 30 percent of these parents would be willing to pay 10 percent or more above the current rate to ensure that their children receive the highest quality care available.<sup>12</sup> Besides cost and location, parents consider cleanliness to be important. More than eight in 10 of parents in the focus groups said cleanliness was a factor in their child care decision. “Clean and friendly” was a refrain heard over and over again in all the focus groups. Parents want to feel comfortable with both the physical environment and with the staff.

But beyond these basics of cost, location and cleanliness, parents are seeking 1) a caregiver they and their children are comfortable with, i.e., they are looking at the interaction between the caregiver and their child; 2) an environment where their children can learn new things and; 3) a setting in which their children can get individualized attention due to appropriate staff-child ratios; i.e., a place where there are not too many

- ▶ Cost, cleanliness and location are the first things parents look at when they make child care decisions, but quality factors are also extremely important to them.
- ▶ The interaction between child and the caregiver is of utmost importance to parents.
- ▶ Parents would like to place their children in an environment where they learn new things.
- ▶ Parents want their children to receive individualized attention, and so they seek small class sizes.

children for each caregiver or teacher. They want their children to receive the attention and teaching they need.

### **Caregiver-Child Interaction:**

**Parents want a caregiver who is friendly and caring, attuned to the needs and capabilities of**

**their children, and informative and professional toward them.** Their main concern is that their child is happy in the child care setting and comfortable with the caregiver. Parents want to make sure that caregivers can interact with children at their level and are friendly and loving toward them.

*"The main thing is that the person caring for the children wants to be in that business, meaning their heart is in it and not just that they studied it. To care for a child you need to really love him. That's the first thing I look for and I notice about the people caring for my daughter."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

*"I want [the caregiver] to be nurturing and loving with my kids."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

*"It was more about our conversation and how they interacted with children."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

Parents were focused on the attitude the caregiver projected. They were unanimous in wanting someone friendly and mainly expressed surprise and shock that so many of the caregivers they encountered did not seem to be equipped for the job.

*"I am mostly shocked to see angry people working with children. How are you angry in front of a child?"*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"There are real young girls working at day cares. That's not good. The attitudes that they bring in."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C.

But aside from interacting well with children, parents would also like caregivers to interact well with them. They want to make sure that the caregiver will communicate with them regularly and that they can establish a rapport with her.

*"Communication is key. The [child care place] is big on paper to communicate and keep you up-to-date."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

*"It's important for me for child care workers to answer the phone. I now know the teachers and already have a relationship with them. I have a long time with the same day care, so I have confidence in them. If someone has a good relationship with the teachers, then you feel comfortable because you can speak with them about how your child is doing and they will give you information about the progress of your child and his behavior. This gives you a lot of confidence because you can ask questions and they can ask you questions. I have also had experiences where they don't give you any information and I felt very frustrated when that happened."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

But most importantly parents want to make sure that their children are happy with the caregiver - the caregiver's interaction with them is secondary to the caregiver's interaction with their child.

*"Some providers are good with kids, but awful with parents. My son has one of those. He drives me up the wall, but my son likes him. I have to remind myself that."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

Many parents assessed the fit of a child care arrangement by their children's reaction to it. "[My child] did not want to leave. She loved it," said an American-Indian parent in Oklahoma, a pretty typical representation of the responses parents gave when asked what they looked for while choosing child care. Following are some other statements parents made, which illustrate the importance parents place on caregiver-child interaction.

*"My daughter was comfortable there."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"My son always likes to go to child care. He wanted to stay longer. My son is happy there."*

—Parent in Boston, MA

*"I really like that my boys are glad to go to the day care. There isn't a lot of staff turnover. Their comfort level has stabilized there."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK



### **A Learning Environment:**

Parents think early childhood learning is important. They invariably described it as “very important,” “necessary,” “critical,” and as a “foundation,” or “getting a child ready” for kindergarten or school. They felt **caregivers should play a role in their children’s education, since children spend a large amount of time in these settings.**

*“If you are a child care provider, you should educate children. Period.”*

– Parent in San Antonio, TX

Parents want an environment where their children learn new things. As one parent in Indianapolis said: “I didn’t want my kids to be babysat. I wanted them to interact and learn. I wanted them to be stimulated. I don’t want my kids in front of the TV all day.” Parents of all races and ethnicities, with different levels of income and education, all wanted their children to be in an environment in which they would learn.

*“I wanted them to instill a love of learning in him. He’ll be in school for a long time. I wanted him to be ready for that. I like that my day care looks at what he is interested in.”*

–Parent in Indianapolis, IN

Additionally, parents want their children to learn through activities, play and structured curricula. Parents expressed some concern that children

were being pushed too early and that they did not get enough play-time. As one Boston mother said: “It can get ridiculous. They need to enjoy being a kid.” But overwhelmingly, they felt that their children should be learning while at play, through activities and curricula that were age-appropriate and that they would find enjoyable.

*“For the infant, they do activities that are age-appropriate. When they reach school, they know how to use the computer.”*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK

*“[The children] aren’t really ever in the building. They do math and enrichment workbooks. They take them swimming. They have movies once a week.”*

–Parent in Boston, MA

*“They take them on field trips. They do a lot of stuff with them – go outside, play soccer, go to McDonalds, go to the movies.”*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*“The teachers are really nice. They take the kids places. There’s diversity in the classroom.”*

–Parent in Boston, MA (Single parents’ group)

Parents were also interested in placing their children in diverse settings, especially where they could learn other languages. Hispanic and Asian parents expressed happiness at their children



learning English - these parents were themselves either not very fluent in English or did not speak the language at all, and they saw their caregiver as a resource in teaching English to their children.

*"There's a teacher at my daughter's school that helps her with the English language. She speaks English very well now. It is a good program."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"He gets the attention he needs. I didn't even know he spoke English and now he knows so much. He can understand. I know he has fun. He talks about the playground. I know he learns a lot."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC (Hispanic group)

English-speaking parents saw it as an added bonus if the caregiver taught their children other languages. American-Indian parents saw this as an opportunity for their children to connect with their culture, while other English-speaking parents associated their child learning other languages with learning new things.

*"The big selling point was when I asked the director if she taught other languages, she said yes, and it was Delaware."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"I like that it's a bilingual setting."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"My son has been to his day care since he's been two. They're really good. It's a big family. The structure is great. They teach him Spanish. He learns a lot. They do a lot with him."*

—Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

#### **Staff-Child Ratio:**

Parents would prefer small class sizes, and staff to child ratio is one of the important factors in their decision-making process. Parents felt that **small class sizes mean more individualized attention** to their children. It was especially important to parents of infants.

*"Working with infants requires patience. My provider has the ability to have six or eight kids, but sometimes she'll only have four if that's what she can handle."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"There is a low teacher-child ratio. She really interacts with the children."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"I like my day care is really small. They know that my 5-year-old doesn't like cheese and my 8-year-old really likes it."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK

Overall, parents were not sure what the staff-child ratio should be, but most of them said the ratio depended on the age of the child and that there were rules that mandated these ratios.

Parents, overall, did not express any problems with the mandated ratios and took it for granted that these rules were enforced.

In short, parents are looking not only for clean child care that they can afford and that is conveniently located, but factors such as how the child care caregiver interacts with them and their children, how much their children learn and the way they learn, and age-appropriate class sizes. The following quote from a father in Indianapolis probably best captures what parents are looking for when choosing child care:

*"I like our day care provider. She has formal education training for children. My daughter likes her . . . She is having fun. She goes to an at-home day care. She's learning about letters and things."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

### **But, What About the Caregiver's Education/Training?**

A few parents mentioned they looked at the education or training the caregiver had when looking for child care. As one North Carolina parent said: "I wanted them to have some classes. Not necessarily a four-year degree. A two-year degree in child development." While most parents did not mention caregiver training or education as among the top three things they look at, **parents acknowledged that they would like the caregiver to have some basic training in child development along with knowledge of First Aid and CPR.** Additionally parents agreed that the caregiver needed to have the skills to be able to provide a learning environment for their children - "Know the standard ways to keep children safe. If they take care of kindergarteners, then they may want to tutor them," said one parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group).

*"Ideally, I would hear that they [caregiver] had a degree from a college or at least a couple of training courses."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

*"I think there's world of difference if someone has a four-year degree because kids are expected to know a great deal."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"For me, every single child care provider should know how the brain and emotions work."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

But some parents also said that experience with children was more valuable to them than the education or training caregivers had. As one North Carolina parent said: "I agree, but I think that experience is very important. There are teachers with four-year degrees, but they don't have the experience." A few did not think that degrees or training indicated quality. As another North Carolina parent said: "For me, it's more important to trust the provider. I know some that have degrees that are as crazy as a loon. Some of them should not be in the field."



## Difficulties Parents Experienced Finding Child Care

While parents have their wish list of what they want in child care, finding the care they want is not easy. More than half the parents in the focus groups said they experienced difficulties finding child care, and four in 10 said it took them more than a month to find child care that met their needs. Parents in San Antonio, TX, Washington, D.C., Pittsboro, NC and Oakland, CA were most likely to experience difficulties. Hispanic and Asian parents in these areas, however, were less likely to say they experienced difficulties finding care and they also reported looking at fewer options to select child care that met their needs. Still, Hispanic and Asian parents took just as long finding child care that met their needs as other parents in these areas. Parents receiving a child care subsidy also experienced less trouble finding care - they looked at fewer places than parents with no subsidy, and most of them found child care that met their needs within a month.

Still, most parents felt that they did not have enough options to choose from. "There are only three options in this area," said a North Carolina parent. **They had the most difficulty in finding child care that was the quality they desired within the price they could afford and that was open the hours that met their needs.** "Quality,

- ▶ Finding child care spaces in itself was a challenge, as the demand for child care easily outstrips supply in most communities. Parents of infants and those with special needs children were especially likely to face difficulties in finding spaces.
- ▶ Finding child care that accommodated their schedule could be challenging, especially for those with non-traditional work hours.
- ▶ Overall, parents faced difficulties finding child care that met their needs within the price they could afford to pay.

availability and hours big problems," said one Oklahoma parent. Parents with special needs children, with infants and those who had multiple children requiring care had the most problems finding child care. The cost of child care played a major role in circumscribing the options parents have - "Cost affects your number of options," said one San Antonio parent. A parent in Washington, D.C., echoed those views saying: "The cost automatically limited me."

In a 1998 national survey, almost nine in 10 parents (89 percent) said finding high quality, affordable child care was difficult, with more than half (57 percent) describing it as “extremely” or “very” difficult. Additionally, almost three-quarters of them (74 percent) said getting high quality care was difficult, with 44 percent rating finding quality care to be “extremely” or “very” difficult.<sup>13</sup>

A 1999 survey in California had similar findings, with more than four out of five parents and virtually the same share of working parents believing that it is difficult for most families in their area today to find affordable, high quality child care, including 28 percent who said it was extremely difficult. Working mothers were even more prone to expressing dissatisfaction, with virtually all of them (91 percent) saying it is difficult to find good, affordable child care in their area, including 36 percent who said it was extremely difficult. Working dads, too, felt the stress of finding good child care, but not to the degree that mothers felt – 78 percent of working dads said it was difficult, including 20 percent who said extremely difficult to find good, affordable child care.<sup>14</sup>

While cost is a major factor in parents’ child care decisions, many parents also discussed facing other difficulties. Chief among the problems they faced were 1) finding a setting for their child that they considered to be quality; 2) finding child care that accommodated their schedules; and 3) finding available child care spaces.

### **The Issue of Quality:**

A common refrain among parents was echoed by a Hispanic San Antonio parent, when she said: “I can always find day care, but then it’s hard to find one I would actually use.” Finding child care that met their criteria within a price that they could afford was a challenge for most parents. When asked if there were enough child care options available to them, an Indianapolis father queried back: “Enough options, or enough good options?” So while, finding a child care arrangement was not difficult, finding one which they trusted and where they felt comfortable leaving their child, was a major issue. This was especially true for parents with younger children. A 2000 study conducted by Public Agenda found that 57 percent of parents with children under age 5 said

the hardest part in finding child care was finding someone “trustworthy.”<sup>15</sup> Parents, it should be noted, associate quality with caregiver attitude – the qualities of warmth, friendliness and trustworthiness that they exude.

**The high cost of child care was, however, a barrier in choosing the quality care that parents wanted.** “I think it was a little difficult because it was expensive. The affordable places were not as high of quality,” said one single mother in Boston. Still, parents had their criteria and many chose to keep looking until they found child care that was satisfactory.

*“The situation I have was I needed to find care because I had to work, but either the facility was in bad shape, the toys were dirty or the staff didn’t seem well-trained to care for the children. I’d rather die than put them there. So, I had no choice but to keep looking.”*

–Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

### **The Issue of Time:**

**Parents, especially those working non-traditional hours, experienced difficulties finding child care.** Four in 10 employed Americans now work non-traditional hours – evenings, nights, weekends or on rotating shifts.<sup>16</sup> These non-traditional schedules affect the lives of an increasing number of families. Finding care during these hours was a big issue for parents when it came to choosing child care. **Some parents even reported changing jobs or foregoing promotions in order to adjust for the child care hours available to them.**

*“I was working part-time and my day varied every week. No one wanted to be flexible.”*

–Parent in Indianapolis, IN

*“I had to change my hours at work and cut back.”*

–Another parent in Indianapolis, IN

*“[My wife] can’t do that [get promoted] because she can’t depend on me to be on schedule. She has to take sacrifices because child care can’t support those hours. The American dream is not afforded to her.”*

–Parent in San Antonio



*"I gave up on a promotion due to the hours of care."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK

Students, especially, had a hard time finding child care that would accommodate their non-traditional schedules. Students have early morning classes and night classes. Many of these parents had jobs, full-time or part-time, in addition to attending school. Finding child care that would work with their schedule was especially challenging for these parents.

*"I'm a full-time student and I was having a hard time transporting my child at the time when they were open."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"I go to school early in the morning. It was hard to find care at that hour."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"I go to school until 9 PM every day. I don't have the [child care] hours I need."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

### **The Issue of Availability:**

In a 1998 national survey, 43 percent of parents said that they or their partner or spouse was prevented from taking a job or the kind of job they wanted due to the lack of acceptable child

care. Additionally, a majority of these parents (52 percent) said the absence of acceptable child care had reduced their or their partner or spouse's ability to do a job as well as they could or as well as they wanted to.<sup>17</sup> Parents in 2005 continued to express dissatisfaction with the amount and quality of child care available to them. Parents with infants, children with special needs, and those with multiple children requiring care had the most trouble finding child care that met their needs.

Many parents with infants mentioned that there was a lack of spaces for infants. As one California parent said, when asked about difficulties in finding child care: "Finding a safe place for my baby." **Trying to find quality infant care, most importantly someone parents can trust their baby with, can be almost "impossible."**

*"I went on a lot of waiting lists. They wouldn't take him because he was so young . . . My oldest daughter, who is 20, quit her job for the first 5 months to babysit for me."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK

*"Most child care won't take them [infants] before 6 months. We managed to find a child care that took infants at 4 months old. She was good, but it wouldn't have mattered because it was our only option."*

—Parent in San Antonio

*"I had to go back to work right away [after giving birth]. It was impossible to find infant care...I must have called 30 people."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA

*"I started when I was 5 months pregnant and went of a lot of waiting lists. My family took care of her until she was 5 months old."*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

**Parents with special needs children also faced difficulties in locating available spaces.** More than one in 10 (11 percent) of children aged 6 to 14 years have a disability.<sup>18</sup> One Oakland parent with a special needs child described how child care facilities didn't return her calls, and "of course, I had to keep calling back." Other parents with children with special needs had similar stories of challenges they face in locating spaces for their children.

*"It was devastating to find out that they [slots] are not available. I have an autistic boy. One place already had an autistic girl and they didn't want a boy on top of it."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA

*"My son has autism. It was very hard to find a place."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

*"My main problem was finding places with small class sizes that provides individual attention for children with special needs."*

–Parent in Boston, MA

Parents with more than one child had problems finding spaces in the same center or home. Many parents said they had to go to more than one child care place for their children, thus adding to the stresses and inconvenience that they already face.

*"I [have] four kids. I had to put two there and two here."*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK

*"I had a younger daughter and older son. I had a hard time finding a center that would take both of them."*

–Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"It's harder when you have two kids. They usually have space for only one child."*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

The lack of available spaces meant that some parents had to travel further to access child care. This was especially mentioned by parents in Boston, though parents in other places also mentioned transportation being an issue.

*"A major problem would be finding transportation. Luckily, I have a car so it makes it easier."*

–Mother in Boston, MA

*"It [finding child care] was difficult. It was hard to coordinate child care with transportation. Then you end up have to go far away and take three or four buses like she said [also mentioned by another participant]. It is a matter of not having access."*

–Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

In summary, while parents say child care is available to them, it is entirely another matter to find child care that meets their standards and is affordable. Parents expressed having difficulty finding quality child care within the price they can afford, especially for infants and children with special needs. Parents with non-traditional schedules face more difficulties, and many of these parents said they had to change jobs to accommodate their child care schedule. The increasing number of workers with non-traditional schedules indicates that this is a supply problem that cannot be ignored.



## Compromises Parents Made:

Parents repeatedly mentioned the high cost of care as a major factor in choosing child care. More than two-thirds of the parents in the focus groups rated the cost of the child care either as their highest concern or among the top two or three concerns. A family in the United States with a 4-year-old encounters average prices of \$3,016 to \$9,628 a year in child care fees. Parents of infants face even higher child care prices. Average child care fees for one infant range from \$3,803 to \$13,480 a year. Furthermore, high quality child care can be even more costly; child care in an accredited center can cost as much as \$5,000 more a year than non-accredited care.<sup>19</sup> Child care costs are close to or exceed housing costs in most states. In 14 states, the average cost of care for an infant or toddler is higher than the median annual rent.

*"(Child care) costs four dollars less than my mortgage each month."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"Day care is more than my rent."*

—Parent in Boston, MA

*"The cost - I left feeling disappointed because I couldn't put my children there due to the cost."*

—Parent in Washington, DC (Hispanic group)

- ▶ The high price of child care is the main reason parents are forced to compromise on the quality of care their children receive.
- ▶ Parents gave up on finding a learning environment for their children because of high prices and lack of availability.
- ▶ They made concessions on the level of training or education the caregiver had in order to place their child in an affordable child care setting.

The high cost of child care, especially quality care, meant that parents had to compromise while choosing a caregiver. More than four in 10 of the participating parents said they paid more than they originally planned. Parents in high cost-of-living areas were more likely to compromise on cost, as were those in rural areas. The reason for compromises in rural areas tended to be more due to lack of enough child care options in those areas.

*"I spend \$25,000 per year. I knew it would be a lot, but that's so much more than I thought."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"We didn't have a choice whether it was expensive or inexpensive because our choices were so limited."*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

The lack of enough affordable options also meant that parents had to travel further to find child care that met their needs. Parents of special needs children and those living in rural areas, especially, had to compromise on location to find adequate child care.

*"My son is in a special pre-school and it's very far away. He's two and taking a bus by himself... This was the only way to do it because he has special needs."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA

*"Distance - I have to drive hours [and] rearrange my schedule."*

–Parent in Pittsboro, NC

Parents also compromised on the quality of care. **They gave up cherished hopes of an educated caregiver, diversity in the classroom, learning activities for their children, structured curricula and enhanced security to find child care they could afford and that accommodated their schedule.**

"Four-year degree," said one North Carolina parent meaning that she had given up on trying to find a caregiver with the qualifications she wanted. Other parents too mentioned "education" as something they compromised on.

*"Education and cost, but I trusted her so I did what I had to do."*

–Parent in Pittsboro, NC

By education, however, parents did not only mean the caregiver's education. They also meant

that they had to give up on education of their children. Parents would like their children to learn through planned curricula and a variety of activities. Many parents also expressed the wish that options in language instruction and a culturally diverse atmosphere were available to them. But when choosing child care, these options were either not available or not available at a price they could afford.

*"More aggressive teaching curriculum."*

–Parent in San Antonio, TX

*"Structure - the place where my kids are has no structure. It was very important to me."*

–Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"All the resources are [for] older [children] and I wish they had more field trips for the younger kids."*

–Parent in Indianapolis, IN

*"Bi-lingual day care setting."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

*"Being around other children and activities."*

–Parent in Washington, D.C.

*"I would very much like to have a Spanish immersion program . . . I had to compromise because it wasn't affordable."*

–Parent in Oakland, CA

Some parents also had security cameras in the child care setting on their wish list. They wanted these cameras as a deterrent against potential abuse. A few parents mentioned web-cams, as something they could use to check up on their children while at work. But these were further down their list of priorities, and were in any case not available to any of these parents.

Overall, parents compromised on their wish-list of what they wanted in their child care arrangement mainly due to the high cost of child care. They ended up paying more, traveling further and conceding on the quality of care, especially in the form of learning environments.



## How Do Parents Define Quality Child Care?

Parents in the focus groups rated the quality of their own child care as almost twice as good as that available within their communities. While, they felt the overall quality of child care available to them in their communities was about average, most said they liked their own child care arrangements, even though they saw room for improvements.

**When asked what they liked about their child care arrangement, parents invariably mentioned their children learning new things through diverse activities with other children in a loving and safe environment.** A North Carolina parent summed up best what parents like about their child care arrangements:

*"I love that my 1-year-old has five other 1-year-olds to play with. They have playgrounds for their age group. They organize field trips. They play outside all the time. I love that as they age they move to different rooms and experience different teachers. My 2-year-old comes home and counts to 15. The TV is not always on. I can look through the window and my children are so happy. They share at school."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

- ▶ Most parents felt that the overall quality of child care available in their communities was average at best.
- ▶ Quality child care, according to parents, means an environment where their children learn and develop.
- ▶ Parents also equate a professional and loving caregiver with quality in child care.
- ▶ The cleanliness and safety of the setting where care is provided is an important indicator of quality, and many parents assume that child care programs undergo regular health and safety inspections.

**Still, many parents saw room for improvement in their child care arrangements.** Most wanted the environment to be more conducive to learning and additional activities, especially educational activities for their children.

*"My child care could be better. There's a lack of curriculum."*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX

*"My concern was also the education of the child care providers that will be dealing with my children. I didn't find that there were many centers that have extra training in that particular area or advanced education."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

*"I would like my son to be in a school-type setting - getting him ready for school. I fall through the cracks for Head Start. There's nothing there. You're poor and can't make it. Or you help yourself and you are over the level. There's no school for him until you start kindergarten in my school district."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"The caregiver is very good. She needs more money to do more activities and better toys."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

The most common characteristics parents attribute to quality child care are: 1) a caregiver with a loving attitude who interacts well with their children and with them; 2) an environment where their children are learning and developing new skills; and 3) a clean and safe place where they can leave their children during work hours without worrying.

### **Quality is a Loving Caregiver:**

When asked what quality child care meant to them, more than half of the parents in the focus groups mentioned the caregiver's attitude.

*"I think also that child care providers' attitude shows how well you can trust a person to take care of your kids for eight hours a day. Their attitude is the first thing you'll notice when you meet someone to take care of your kid. I don't want someone with issues - I mean everyone has issues - but they need to be positive around the kids."*

—Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"I can figure out in the first 30 minutes. Their demeanor - whether they are eager or burnt out. How they interact with the kids."*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX

**Parents with children in center-based settings frequently remarked that the attitude was set by the director of the center and that it was**

**important that the director set the right tone.** In their view, the center director's attitude could influence the attitude of the teachers and thus have an impact on staff turnover, teacher attitude, and the overall quality of care that their children received.

*"But the director had a bad attitude. The workers hated working there. That trickled down to the kids."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

*"One of the questions I asked all the teachers I visited: are you happy working here? I found out if there was high turnover, that's not good for the kids."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

Parents are, however, divided in their views on the impact of caregiver training on the caregiver's attitude toward them and their children. Some parents thought that taking care of a child in a loving and caring fashion is an innate quality that cannot be taught. As one American-Indian parent in Bartlesville, OK said, "A lot of it has to do with your personality. Training might not have any affect." Most parents, however, thought that training could have a positive impact on the way a caregiver interacted with their children. One American-Indian parent in Bartlesville, OK, who works as a caregiver said: "I have had a significant amount of training, and I definitely do things differently than I would have before the training." Other parents, not involved in caring for children professionally, echoed her views:

*"If you found a school that pays and supports continuing education, you have found a very good school."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"You can be a phenomenal day care provider, but with training you can be better."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"Before you become a licensed provider, you should have to have child development training. Then as a parent, [you] won't worry. The attitude of the provider could change."*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX



### **Quality is a Learning Environment:**

Half of the parents also thought that social experiences for their children denoted quality care, while about one-third mentioned their children learning new things. Fathers, especially, saw their children having social experiences and learning new things as being representative of quality care, with more than three-quarters of them mentioning these factors in quality care. **Parents, overall, felt that child care was a place where their children can learn new things in the company of other similarly aged children, and many see that as a beneficial aspect of placing their children in a child care program.**

*"I like my son being excited about learning, whether it's Batman or Superman and safety - I'm happy about it."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"To share, to say what they think, to speak about their feelings. We want our children to be emotionally as well as physically healthy. They should have self-confidence, and should be able to say something is good or bad, or I have a problem, I feel sad, someone help me. Something that sounds silly, but if you don't learn these things as a child, you will have problems as an adult, more so now with the delinquency in society."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

*"They learn how to conform to society at the same time you put them in day care. The fact that they are learning and not just being tossed in a room."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"[Children] are not always in the classroom setting. Playing with toys. Learn through play. Caregivers need to know how to do that - good [for caregivers] to have training for that."*

—Parent in Boston, MA

### **Quality is a Clean and Safe Environment:**

Slightly more than four in 10 parents mentioned the condition of the child care setting, by which they mainly meant the cleanliness and safety, but parents also wanted to make sure that the place was child-friendly and had the appropriate equipment. Moreover, about one-third of the parents mentioned regular health and safety checks as being a quality indicator.

*"Up-to-date in terms of cribs, beds, napping facilities. Not state-of-the-art, but I want toys to be clean and appropriate."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

Most parents did not check to see if their child care program was licensed or had been recently inspected. Parents, for the most part, reported doing self-checks to ensure that the center or home met their standards of safety and cleanliness.

*"I didn't look. I just made sure it was clean and it looked good."*

—Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"My wife was a stickler for stuff, so we did our own inspection."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

Several parents expressed skepticism with the inspection process. They did not trust that the inspections were truly random and unannounced.

*"[Child care facilities] are not safe. DHS comes in, and they [providers] know when they [inspectors] are coming. They will fix what they have to fix before they show up."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

*"I think it needs to be unscheduled. In my small community, they [providers] know before they [inspectors] come."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

Overall, most parents did not check to see if their child care program was licensed, had any infractions on its license and had been inspected

recently. A few parents, who were either involved in the child care field or had had negative experiences, reported checking these documents. The caregiver's attitude clearly outweighed all other considerations with parents:

*"The teacher my son has right now is not licensed. But she is so much more remarkable than the last place I went. My son adores her. She communicated with me on a regular basis. She's very attentive and supportive of my child's needs. Sometimes license is paperwork. It's helpful, but not necessary. It is not an indicator of how good of a teacher you are."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK (American-Indian group)

**Still, parents expect regular inspections of child care programs.** When asked how often these child care programs should be inspected, responses ranged from every three months to couple of times a year. Some parents thought the frequency of the inspections should be based on the previous inspection results of the child care center or home. But almost all the parents emphasized that inspections should be random and unannounced.

In short, parents consider quality child care to be a place where their children can learn through activities and interaction with other children in a safe, healthy and loving environment. Moreover, parents overall thought that child care programs in their communities mostly did not have these quality attributes, and the high prices made the few places with such attributes unaffordable to most of them.



## Training for Caregivers – What, How Much and Who Should Pay?

Parents in the focus groups unanimously felt that caregivers should be required to have some basic training. The reason they felt training was necessary was summed up best by one parent:

*“You must have a base, but it gives you as a parent some confidence to know this person has gone to school. Personally, when I came to this country, I wasn’t well-trained, but I had an instinct on how to care for children because I have four of them. But that is personal. In general, a person should seek training and accreditation. You can’t pull teeth if you are not a dentist, but there are many jobs where training is not mandatory. But a child is a human being after all.”*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

**In addition to First Aid and CPR, parents felt training should also include classes in child development, disciplining techniques, children’s behavioral issues, anger management, dealing with children with special needs, communicating with parents, and age-specific courses.** Most parents thought that caregivers should be required to undergo training on an on-going basis. As one parent put it:

- ▶ Caregivers should have training in First Aid, CPR and child development issues, according to parents.
- ▶ Caregivers should be required to receive training on an on-going basis.
- ▶ Parents support public subsidy of training for caregivers, as they realize that most do not make much money.

*“No matter how much education you have, there are always new developments.”*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

Parents were also asked who should pay for the training. Opinions ranged from “if you have mandates, you’ve got to pay for it,” to “if you’re going to have a business, you should be willing to pay for training and to better your business.” Some parents thought that for center-based caregivers the employer should help foot the bill. The following comments cover the gamut of parents’ feelings regarding who should pay for training providers undergo:

*"I think employers should pay for it. The government should help pay half or a portion of it."*

–Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"If you're going to make mandates, you have to have the money to back it up."*

–Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"The federal government should pay for these people to be educated. When the child grows to become a good citizen, we are not wasting money - we are making a good investment."*

–Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

*"If you're going to have a business, you should be willing to pay for training and to better your business."*

–Another parent in Pittsboro, NC





## Who Is Responsible for Quality Child Care?

Parents felt that parents, communities and government should work together to improve the quality of child care in the United States. Government involvement, parents felt, should be at the tier closest to the community, i.e., local or state government, as community needs differ from place to place.

*"I think it should be a board of child care providers, parents and educators. I'm not sure that the government has enough experience with child care. It should be at the state and local level. The government has a lot of outside agendas and child care is not one of them."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

While parents felt that local government was better equipped to deal with child care issues (as needs varied from community to community), almost all the parents felt that there should be minimum standards mandated at the federal level. But parents also stressed that states and localities should be able to set their own standards and enforcement of all standards should rest with the local or state governments.

*"A child is a child no matter what state they live in."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN

▶ Parents, communities, educators, policy-makers and scholars in the field should all be involved in ensuring that child care available in the United States is of high quality.

▶ Standards for child care should be set federally and enforced locally.

*"I think it should be a balance. Federally governed where states can add to it, but they can't fall below the standards."*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX

*"I think parents can only go so far. If the government doesn't set standards, the parents couldn't regulate it."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

**In short, parents want all stakeholders, including themselves, educators and policy-makers, to be involved in improving the quality of child care in the U.S.** Furthermore, while they support minimum federally mandated standards, they feel that enforcement should occur at the local level and some mentioned that the federal government should not mandate standards without providing adequate funding to enforce those standards.



## What Do Parents Think Of Pre-Kindergarten Programs?

Parents were asked their opinion on part-day (two to three hours a day) pre-kindergarten (pre-K) programs geared toward 3- to 5-year-olds. **Most parents thought these programs were a good idea.** Some parents had children in pre-K programs, and their opinions of these programs were uniformly good.

*"My son just graduated. They're definitely learning something."*

—Parent in Washington, D.C.

*"My children are there. It's been a great experience. They get the benefit of staying at home and the interaction."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

*"It helps the baby's development, of a girl or boy, because they learn more, they get accustomed to being independent."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC (Hispanic group)

*"It's good socialization for her. My child is the only child at home. It's better to go out and meet other children for the social interaction. Our income is not that low, but it's not high enough to pay for this sort of program."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

**But working parents were concerned that the program did not answer their needs.** They felt that a program outside their child care arrangement, which is two to three hours a day, and especially those without transportation options, did not fit with their schedules.

*"My husband and I work full-time. It's not enough. It sounds good, but it's not enough."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA

*"If you're working full-time, you have to assign someone to take your child to and from the program. It benefits parents who work part-time."*

—Parent in Pittsboro, NC

*"[My children] wouldn't be able to go, because I couldn't transport them in the middle of the day."*

—Parent in Bartlesville, OK



*“With a 5-year-old and only a half-day program, as a working parent, this is impossible.”*

—Parent in Boston, MA

*“Two to three hours is an awkward time period. It’s not enough for half-day work.”*

—Parent in Oakland, CA (Asian group)

**Additionally, many parents pointed out that children do not just learn for a two or three hour duration, but throughout the course of the day. As one parent put it:**

*“Not for me, because I think the child needs more than three or four hours to learn; the child is always learning, playing, speaking, singing - he is always learning . . . When they are playing there should always be someone showing them and teach them so they learn.”*

—Parent in Washington, D.C. (Hispanic group)

While parents think that pre-K programs offer their children a learning environment, they feel that they as working parents cannot take advantage of these programs. Transportation is a major obstacle for these parents. In any case, some parents felt that their children should be in an environment conducive to learning throughout the day and not just for a part of the day.

It is possible that parents would be more prone to take advantage of these learning opportunities for their children, if these programs were offered within their child care setting, since then transportation needs would be eliminated, and the children would be exposed to a learning environment throughout the day.



## Do Parents Support Child Care Subsidy Programs?

**Parents, overall, support the child care subsidy programs, and parents using child care subsidies stressed that without this subsidy they might find themselves on welfare.** Many parents called for expanding child care subsidies to include more families. Some of the parents suggested that subsidies should be provided on a sliding scale and not be completely cut-off if a family exceeded the income limit by just a few dollars.

*"I agree that low-income needs more help than us, but where's the help for us?"*

—Parent in San Antonio, TX

*"They should break it up. It should be a sliding scale."*

—Parent in Boston, MA (Single-parents' group)

*"If they're going to have vouchers and subsidies, then I agree with the inspections - it ensures that there is quality day care."*

—Parent in Indianapolis, IN (Fathers' group)

*"It's better than the money going to prisons. Comparatively it's great."*

—Parent in Oakland, CA



## Final Thoughts

These focus groups, overall, indicate that parents are seeking a loving and caring caregiver, who provides a clean environment where their child can learn in small settings. But parents are constrained by expense and availability. The price of care is a major issue with parents and, overall, parents supported expanding the child care subsidy program to include more working parents. Many parents said they were paying as much or at times even more than their mortgage or rent

on child care, but they had no choice, as they needed the care in order to work.

As a result many parents are compromising on the quality of care their children receive. They are, especially, giving up on placing their children in an environment, where they feel their children are learning. They are also giving up hard-won promotions or changing jobs in order to accommodate the child care hours that are available to them.

### These focus groups reveal the need for:

- ▶ Expanding the child care infrastructure by making more quality, affordable child care spaces available, where children can learn in a safe, healthy and loving environment, in communities.
- ▶ Ensuring that quality child care is not only available but also affordable to parents who need care.
- ▶ Expanding or reforming the child care subsidy system to allow more parents, struggling to make ends meet with low-paying jobs, to afford quality child care for their children.
- ▶ Ensuring that child care programs meet mandated standards of health and safety by setting and enforcing these standards through regular, random inspections.
- ▶ Ensuring the child care workforce is ready to work with children by mandating training in safety procedures and child development that all caregivers must have.
- ▶ Educating parents on the issues surrounding child care and the indicators of quality care.



## How Did NACCRRRA Recruit Participants?

Local Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies (CCR&R) in the selected cities were asked to recruit the parents following the demographic guidelines provided by NACCRRRA. They posted flyers, publicized the focus groups at various community meetings, etc. to recruit parents who fit the criteria. Participating parents were given

a cash incentive to participate and dinner was served before the group. The groups were conducted by a NACCRRRA staff member and lasted approximately two hours each. The groups were conducted either on the premises of the CCR&R or another location identified by the CCR&R.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup>U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. May 2005. (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2005.htm>).
- <sup>2</sup>U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Women in the Labor Force: A Databook*. May 2005. (<http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook2005.htm>).
- <sup>3</sup>Center for Economic and Policy Research. *Working Moms and Child Care*. May 2004, 4.
- <sup>4</sup>United States Census Bureau. *Maternity Leave and Employment Patterns of First-Time Mothers: 1961-2005*. October, 2005.
- <sup>5</sup>National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education. *Child Care and Early Education Arrangements of Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers: 2001*. (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006039.pdf>)
- <sup>6</sup>U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Money Income in the United States: 1999 (*Current Population Reports*, P60-209). Washington, DC:U.S. Government Printing Office.
- <sup>7</sup>Bureau of Labor Statistics Monthly Labor Review. Earnings of husbands and wives in dual-earner families. April 1998. (<http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1998/04/art4full.pdf>), 42.
- <sup>8</sup>Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. Faith and Family in America, October, 2005. ([http://www.greenbergresearch.com/publications/reports/renreligionandfamily\\_summary.pdf](http://www.greenbergresearch.com/publications/reports/renreligionandfamily_summary.pdf))
- <sup>9</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. *Who's Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Winter 2002*: October, 2005.
- <sup>10</sup>Harris Interactive. *The Harris Poll on Child Care*: January 1998.
- <sup>11</sup>Harris Interactive. *The Harris Poll on Child Care*: January 1998.
- <sup>12</sup>Easter Seals and Yankelovich and Partners. *Survey of Parents*: July 2001.
- <sup>13</sup>Harris Interactive. *The Harris Poll on Child Care*: January 1998.
- <sup>14</sup>Pinkus, Susan. Poll Analysis: Child Care in America: Los Angeles Times: June 20, 1999. ([http://www.latimes.com/news/local/timespoll/state/la-990620kidpoll-426pa2an,1,2918225.htmlstory?coll=la-news-times\\_poll-state](http://www.latimes.com/news/local/timespoll/state/la-990620kidpoll-426pa2an,1,2918225.htmlstory?coll=la-news-times_poll-state))
- <sup>15</sup>Public Agenda. *Necessary Compromises*: 2000.
- <sup>16</sup>Presser, Harriet B. *Working in a 24/7 Economy: Challenges for American Families*: February 2005.
- <sup>17</sup>Harris Interactive. *The Harris Poll on Child Care*: January 1998.
- <sup>18</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. *Current Population Survey and Survey of Income and Program Participation*: Oct. 2001.
- <sup>19</sup>NACCRRRA. *Breaking the Piggy Bank: Parents and the High Price of Child Care*: Jan. 2006.

