



The Search for Child Care

Master Summary of Findings from Family Voices Focus Groups



September 2016

Background and Objectives

In July and August 2016, Child Care Aware® of America undertook qualitative research on the consumer purchase decision for child care. Focus groups were conducted in four locations, in partnership with Child Care Resource Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) and other similar state agencies who organized parents to attend the discussion groups. Information obtained through the focus groups was intended to gain the perspective of families to inform the development of a child care consumer education resource suite.

The primary goal of the Family Voices focus groups funded by the W. K. Kellogg foundation and described herein was to obtain a deep understanding of the child care consumer information families from diverse backgrounds need and desire along with the best vehicles and formats for child care consumer information delivery and receipt. Focus group results will be paired with information gleaned from literature reviews, a parent poll and key informant interviews with child care and health and human service professionals to develop a child care consumer education resource suite and boost understanding of best practices for the application of child care consumer education targeting tactics for diverse populations by child care resource and referral agencies.

The following agencies were contacted and assisted in the coordination and hosting of each respective focus group:

- **Kansas/Missouri:** The Family Conservancy
- **Maine:** KVCAP Kennebec Valley Community Action Program Child and Family Services
- **California:** The Child Care Resource Center
- **Mississippi:** The Early Learning Network

The research sought to better understand how parents go about shopping for child care, the factors that matter in their decision-making, and how they gather and evaluate information about possible providers. Respondents were guided through an activity that structured their thinking about the definition of a child care consumer and were probed about the key points of the child care consumer pathway. Among the areas explored were:

- What it was like to initiate a search for child care;
- Information and resources respondents found;
- How the information and resources found were applied and what role they played in securing a provider;
- Ideas about the support families need when transitioning to a new child care arrangement.

Methods and Participant Composition

The research sought to better understand how families go about searching for child care, factors involved in decision making, and how they gather and evaluate information about possible child care providers. Respondents were guided through an activity that structured their thinking about the definition of a child care consumer and were probed about the key points of the child care consumer pathway. Among the areas explored were:

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- How the information and resources found were applied and what role they played in securing a provider;
- Ideas about the support families need when transitioning to a new child care arrangement.

The research consisted of four focus group discussions with the following breakdown:

- **Kansas/Missouri:** *Located on the Missouri–Kansas border, the focus group was composed of 14, mostly urban parents from lower income brackets. This group contained a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds and some participants identified their families as new Americans, dual language speakers, and parents of a child with special needs.*
- **Maine:** *This rural community provided a pool of seven respondents from a diversity of backgrounds. Experiences of low-income, homelessness, teenage parenthood, new American status and having children with special needs were reported among participants.*
- **California:** *Los Angeles County provided an urban backdrop for this focus group of 10 participants, mostly composed of families identifying as low-income and many indicating a Hispanic/Latino background.*
- **Mississippi:** *This focus group was comprised of 12 participants, many from outlying, mostly rural areas. This dynamic group of racially and ethnically diverse participants also included three parents providing licensed in-home child care, young mothers, and parents of children with special needs.*

Each focus group was facilitated by staff from the Family & Community Engagement department of Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA).

Profile of Research Respondents

- Urban/rural
- Racial/ethnically diverse
- Impoverished
- Experienced Homelessness
- Dual language families
- New Americans

- Parents with a child with special needs

To analyze the data, a matrix was constructed using the topic areas of the discussion guide. The respondents' comments were sorted and assigned to each topic area and then analyzed for convergence (agreement) and divergence (no consensus). Respondent comments were tagged to their location to uncover any trends specific to the local area. Additional sorting was done to accommodate topics that emerged organically. All moderator and CCAoA facilitator comments were excluded from the analysis.

Due to the small sample size, non-random selection and qualitative nature of focus group research, the findings reported here cannot be projected to the larger population. They are a snapshot of the insights gained during the focus groups.

Throughout this report, verbatim quotes from the research participants appear in italics and are used to illustrate the findings.

Critical Insights

1. Finding child care is a top-of-mind consideration for most parents interviewed and anecdotally, some mention that economic pressure to return to work causes them to seek out their options during pregnancy.
2. Parents spoke of the difficulty in finding a provider in whom they can place their trust, as well as meets their budget, accepts state assistance if they are receiving it, and has availability. These hurdles seem compounded in the case of families with special needs children.
3. The search begins with word-of-mouth. The decision to put a child with a provider is an emotional one, and recommendations from trusted family and friends go a long way to raising a parent's comfort level.
4. Word-of-mouth is not restricted to in-person conversations. Social media plays an important role for parents when searching and reviewing options for child care in that it is another way to get recommendations for options from trusted sources and to gather feedback about options they are considering. In fact, Facebook was the single most mentioned resource in the discussion groups. While the urban groups were more likely to talk about online sources, they were mentioned and used by some even in the most rural discussion group (Maine). Digital word-of-mouth on child care was happening through their own social media pages as well as social media groups they've joined. However, there were no mentions of using a provider's sponsored social media page to get information.
5. Most parents interviewed turned to online resources such as Google and Yelp in their most recent search for child care and were generally unsatisfied with the

results. As far as they know there is no single, curated website at which to get information about providers in their area. They use Google and Yelp to find providers and look at online reviews to weed poor ones out. However, they find the information online (whether reviews or at provider websites) to be incomplete and often hard to navigate to find the information crucial to making decisions. While they are using online sources, they don't trust the information very much and even after placing their child with a provider, some speak of the need for "pop-up" visits to reassure themselves.

6. At the end of the day, parents say there is no substitution for going to the site and speaking with the care provider in-person. That said, throughout these conversations there was a strong desire for web-based information on facilities to be consistent, thorough, vetted and reliable.

Gathering Initial Information

The first step in search for a provider starts with word-of-mouth from friends and family.

Parents across all four cities said their first step in finding the right child care arrangement was to ask around to friends and family. More so than in the past (according to parents of older children) the search for options also included going to online resources as well. Google searches and Yelp reviews primarily were mentioned as the online sources used. Social media placed a role in widening word-of-mouth searching through Facebook, whether on personal pages or through groups on the site. The table below shows the number of mentions for each of these sources in each discussion group.

	Kansas/ Missouri	Maine	California	Mississippi	Total for Each Source
Facebook	11	7	23	8	49
Yelp	3	4	14	4	25
Google	8	1	12	6	27
Internet	6	5	9	10	30
Total Online Mentions in each Discussion	28	17	58	28	

Representative comments from participants include:

I just posted on my personal Facebook and asked if anybody knew of daycares. Then once I got a list of daycare names, I just went from there. So I started by asking friends and family online.

We went to other families and asked them where their kids were.

My sister's mother-in-law owns a daycare center so I asked her what she thought first and visited those places.

I went straight to the place, you just have to go and ask questions and set up a tour. It's the best way to answer everything.

Networking can extend to friends-of-friends when a parent is trying to fill a very specific need for a child, as in the case shared by one parent of a special needs child:

I called my friend...Then I posted on Facebook, and I called my best friend. Somehow she found some place up north, but they wouldn't accept us because we didn't live up north. Then she found out, she used to date a guy who is now a special-education teacher at one of the [local CCR&R noted] delegates, and she saved my life.

While mentioned across all focus groups, in the discussion among California parents, beginning the search with online sources such as general web searching, Yelp, and Facebook seemed a bit more prevalent.

I found a group of moms on Facebook and you can ask what daycare they use - I feel like they are real moms telling me their experiences.

I did a search online. I put in my city and looked through what daycares popped up. I just Googled it.

I used Yelp because it has reviews as well.

I used the [local CCR&R noted] website first.

Once parents had an idea of a few places, looking for information online and visiting the child care center in person were the next step. Online information, particularly reviews, play a part in helping parents weed out the centers that don't seem to be a good fit or have too many bad reviews.

I mean, the reviews are going to help make a decision. Like, maybe I will go check it out. There are too many bad reviews, I'm just going to skip it and go to the next one.

You kind of just have to go for yourself. Whether there's, if there's half bad reviews and half of them are good, it goes down to your gut. If you feel like it's a good thing for you, go, check it out. I mean, daycare's different. It's not like buying a TV. A flyer's not going to work. I have to go in and see it in person.

Ultimately, visits to the facility are the most critical step in evaluation and are the main inputs to final decision making.

Call and make an appointment and then touring the facility is a big thing. Once your child is there make an unannounced visit and just show up. Surprise visits are never a bad thing no matter how long your kid's been there.

These days, you can't really trust anything.... I wouldn't put my child in a daycare just based on reviews.

The search for childcare often begins while mothers are still pregnant.

Many respondents in these groups began to search for child care options while still pregnant, whether to be more prepared to go back to work or to get a head start on waitlists. Economic pressure can play a role in the timing of the search for child care. Knowing that you will need to return to work quickly motivates an early search while pregnant.

For me it was before we even got pregnant, before my kids were born, I put them on the waiting list so they had a spot.

I was calling while I was pregnant just to get ideas so I know, once the baby comes, I know my plan.

As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I didn't go baby shopping, I went daycare shopping because I knew I had to go back to work.

However, several parents waited until their child was born, while some only started searching for childcare when expecting a second child. Some parents assumed they couldn't afford care and made other plans with family members or less expensive options.

I waited until the last minute... I didn't really think about it until my mom had mentioned something to me.

When I had twins, I didn't think I could afford child care, so I stayed home for the first year. Then I heard about the state assistance helping you if you qualified, so I made sure that I qualified first and then they gave me a list of providers.

Cost is the most significant determinant of whether to seriously consider a provider and plays a huge role in the final decision.

Cost and payment structure were top of mind for all parents across all four cities. In some cases, cost of child care resulted in parents seeking alternative care for their child.

A lot of nanny's want to be paid as much as I get paid, so that was not possible. So I hired a high school student.

Also, the wait list. There is a big wait list for assistance to get help paying for child care. And that makes a difference in the places I'm going to look at.

There was mixed awareness of state assistance programs and some expressed mixed feelings about the stigma associated with receiving financial aid to assist with child care.

If you receive any assistance ---- care or food stamp benefits, your child can go to the after- school program there for free. I think a lot of people don't know that.

Some places you have to have state assistance or they don't take you. That was something I learned.

Or vice versa. They didn't accept people with it.

Beyond costs, parents want to know as much as they can about the structure of their child's day. They need to feel that their child is getting attention, stimulation and developmental learning opportunities appropriate to their age.

Parents are interested in the upkeep of the facility/provider space, caregiver-child ratios, curriculum, structure of the day, and so on. The environment of the facility is especially important to parents in helping them to feel comfortable leaving their child there for the day. While licensing was only mentioned specifically in one group, parents in all groups were interested in learning more about the teachers/staff and their backgrounds in child care.

What they are teaching, what is my kid going to learn from it?

The provider being bilingual was important; the cleanliness of the facility and the proximity to their homes, their hours, and then just that it's a welcoming environment.

Quality, safety, price, we pay by the day, hours, availability, ages accepted, if they will take disabled children, discounts for multiple children, on and on...

I would say the involvement in the classroom or in the group that they're not just sitting there and the kids are entertaining themselves, and they're actively involved with everyone.

Ratio, child to instructor ratio in their care.

Cleanliness and what the kids do all day. Are your kids sitting in front of the TV or are they actually doing projects and going outside and playing and learning.

If they are licensed. Also training the teachers may have had. I want to know that before they are keeping my child.

In addition, schedule and hours of coverage are critical and were mentioned specifically in Maine groups.

Well, I have a really hard time, because we're actually a couple towns over. They don't have aftercare, and I go to school. So I don't know what I'm going to do. I mean, my husband works, and I don't get home till 4:30, and their school ends at 2:30, and there's nothing available. I mean, with all three of them, I'd be paying close to \$250 just for a couple hours after school, even if they got in somewhere.

Schedule is big for me. Can they go for a half day if I don't need them there all day?

Cleanliness of the facility was important for parents across many locations.

I worked in a daycare facility one time for three days and and I saw a baby crawling around with their mouth all over the floor, I'm very OCD so I make sure my baby's safe and clean.

If the actual place was clean. You can tell right away how clean they keep the building when you walk in.

Finding a good fit can be stymied by waiting lists and lack of availability, or in some cases refusal to take a child because of special needs. Getting this information late in the game can cause real angst.

My son also has special needs. I work at a community center. They have a preschool. From the day I found out I was pregnant, I thought he was going to go to that preschool. A week before he was set to enroll, they decided they wanted to do a final assessment. They denied him because of his disability. I left there crying that day... I was going to have to quit my job and stay home, which in today's world, I think child care is a very emotional thing, because we don't want to not be at home with our kids, but we live in a world where you need at least an income, if not two. So it's an emotional thing for a parent, especially a mother, to be looking for child care.

Because one of them wouldn't take special needs kids, so they'd say, well, this place does. So I called that place. Or the Internet was a big, huge resource for me, too. Or like the Yellow Pages or White Pages.

Using Information and Resources

Online is a good place to start, but does not give sufficient information to make a final decision.

Even though parents in all four cities listed different trusted resources, there was no substitute to going into the facility themselves to look around and ask questions. Online resources were generally a place to start for many parents, but in the end, trust is low among those types of resources.

I always go in myself. Somebody else's experience might not be the same as mine, you can't really know for sure until you see it yourself. I always go straight to the source.

Myself, I want to go see the place, talk to the people. If I don't feel comfortable, walk away. If I feel like I'm comfortable and at home, then that's the place that you need to at least try... then you have to see if your kid likes it and feels at home.

I mean just in this room alone, you can see how many different experiences that we've had with the same information [online]. So my experience may be different than her experience with the same facility.

Any of those public reviews on any site or anywhere you go, I think it's going to be one extreme or the other. You're not going to get the sound information that you're looking for.

Ultimately, the [online] reviews only influence whether or not I'm going to check out a place in person. It's not my final stop to making a decision.

I don't think I would recommend anything [to other parents]. You can Google and compile a list and tell them all these things, but if I'm going to bring my child somewhere, I need to see it, feel it, and know what's going on. I can't get that online or from someone else.

Online reviews help weed out facilities. When parents see a negative review online, it makes them less inclined to visit the site themselves. Positive reviews were helpful when trying to decide which facilities deserved further investigation.

I think that's what we do with the internet. You just go to get a generalized idea, a consideration of what is something I could potentially I could walk into and kind of form your own opinion. Like she said, everybody's experience is different.

If something is rated one star, you're not even going to read the reviews; you're just going to go past it. If it's five stars, I'm going to look at the lowest first and see who had horrible experiences. If it's a perception of what actually was a good experience but that person didn't take it that way, then I'm going to see that experience as different. Then I'm going to go look at some of the midrange and some of the high range. It's kind of; again, take it with a grain of salt.

I found a group of moms on Facebook...and then I would put in, do you guys like this daycare? And they said, no, yes, [and so on.] I felt like, these are real moms telling me their experiences.

Any of those public reviews on any site or anywhere you go, I think it's going to be one extreme or the other. You're not going to get the sound information that you're looking for.

See, my curiosity was, how does that place run? Why is it so good? I wanted to dig into that because I had just come from another Head Start, but it was fine. It was through the Y. It had been there for years, but I thought the Y was the best place on earth. And then, when I came here, I was like, what's different between the Y and Educare. So I went to the reviews to find out why it was different.

Supporting Parents' Search

Parents want to hear about potential childcare facilities a multitude of ways.

Information available online and in-person conversations stood out as ways parents want to receive information about childcare centers. Some also mentioned that hospitals and pediatrician offices would be a good conduit of information. Online resources have the advantage of convenience whereas in-person conversations were seen as best for being able to answer any questions parents could think of immediately.

I like getting information via word of mouth. I don't like websites very much, because if you have a specific question, they don't really go into that detail on the website. I would rather ask a real person.

I think a website would be ideal. I think she touched on the fact that there's not a lot of information that you can find. That way, you can search it out yourself rather than wait for someone to send you that information. There definitely is not as much information as there should be about certain providers.

I want to receive information directly from them. When we started looking for daycares, the one that I chose, the director was actually at the center and able to talk to me. I liked that she was there and overseeing things.

I would want something in written form, I know it's bad to get paper, but I like to have all the prices written down in front of me.

I think putting information in doctors' offices. I currently work for Inland Hospital, and our office is located down in the concourse. Our population of people, they seem to struggle. Not a lot of money, disabilities, so I think it would be helpful if we had information to give these people... to give them an idea about child care.

A common thread was the complaint that online resources (provider websites, listings, review sites, etc.) need to be upgraded and updated to clearly show pricing, availability and the features of the facility/provider.

Due to scheduling restrictions, better online resources were a must for these busy parents. Many felt confused by sites and complained about the lack of information available on these websites. An informative, easy to use website would be appreciated and would help to give parents all the information they need before proceeding with a visit to the facility or a phone call to someone on staff.

I did a lot of my search online. I didn't really do a lot of going to places because of work, so a lot of them either didn't have a website or they had at least a Facebook page with some of the information. A lot of the times price wasn't included in that online assessment. And then a lot of times I wasn't able to call until after they were closed. I guess a way for these centers to put up the information that parents would want to know.

I feel like, isn't it because a lot of websites, they cost money to maintain and they need someone to maintain it? So they don't maintain it. Who has the time to do that? Especially if you're a private care or even if you're a big agency like Educare, who does that? I mean, I know [workplace noted] where I work, there's someone, that's their job is just to maintain the website. Actually, that's multiple people within the agency that keep up with ads of openings. So who has the time for that for any other care that's not a big agency or a big building like Educare? That's what's hard.

I did a lot of my search online. I didn't really do a lot of going to places, so a lot of them either didn't have a website or they had at least a Facebook page made up and all the information you wanted to find wasn't quite on there, which I mean, I don't blame them for not putting up what their price is. Some people did put what they charge weekly, but others didn't, so it was hard to know.

Bottom Line Trust of Sources

Parents in all four cities said they trusted themselves and personal experiences the most; there is no one better qualified or capable of making this decision for them and their child.

In addition to themselves, parents also try to hear from their children on their experience with a facility. Outside of that, parents trusted other family members and friends who may have had their children in the same facility.

I trusted my own judgment. Even though the family advocate gave me choices, actually calling and getting my own information. I trusted my own judgment, doing and walking through all of that myself helped.

Myself, I want to go see the place, talk to the people. If I don't feel comfortable, walk away. If I feel like I'm comfortable and at home, then that's the place that you need to at least try... then you have to see if your kid likes it and feels at home.

I trust family. Especially since my sister has a master's in social work so she can give me really good advice.

Other families that have used the child care provider.

My son, when he was enrolled we talked about his experiences there.

I trust Care.com; one of my cousins uses it all the time and always has a good experience.

Talking to the parents that go to that center. Because sometimes they will tell you that they like it or maybe they are just there because of the price.

Although they may be looking at online resources, these are not genuinely trusted sources. When asked to name the resources they trust least when making a decision about child care, online search and reviews were top of mind for most parents. Social media sites had mixed reviews depending on whether the information was coming from a “friend” or just an online group. Often in the discussions when one participant mentioned skepticism about Facebook or other sources, there was a lot of head-nodding and general agreement.

I don't trust the facility website. Particularly because if you go to a website, you're going to have raving reviews on their own website -- they don't put up negative reviews on their website.

Any of those public reviews on any site or anywhere you go, I think it's going to be one extreme or the other. You're not going to get the sound information that you're looking for.

These days you can't really trust anything. I wouldn't put my child in a daycare just based on reviews. Anyone can write anything online.

I mean ultimately, the reviews only influence whether or not I'm going to check out a place in person. It's not my final stop to making a decision.

A lot of people hide behind Facebook.

I even think their own pages aren't always the most reliable if they're not keeping up on it. If you see that the last post was six months ago, how reliable is what you can find on there?

I would trust Facebook coming from friends, but not just a facility's Facebook page. They could put anything they want on there.

At the end of the day, parents say they need to rely on their own judgment and the “feeling” they get from the provider and the facility. Lack of trust can linger even after the decision to place a child with a provider, and some speak of the need for surprise visits to put their minds at ease.

You can Google and compile a list, but as far as, if I'm going to bring my child somewhere, I need to see it, feel it, and know what's going on. It's really to compile your list, Google it, whatever you want to do, but go into that place, meet with the people that are going to take care of your baby.

Role of Social Services and Agencies

There were mixed reviews among cities on the role that social services and similar agencies have played in helping parents find child care. Some parents had luck and appreciated the information social services was able to give them while some mentioned that there is a stigma among parents with accepting help from social services and financial aid.

I don't know. The first thought was Head Start. I'm not putting my kids in Head Start. So that goes along with the social services thing. There's kind of like some kind of stigma.

The staff at [local hospital noted] their social worker is phenomenal with getting us hooked up with First Steps and then getting us hooked up with Social Security services while she was in the hospital. Everything afterwards just kind of went

from there. We just kept in touch with everyone, but the hospital itself is phenomenal out there.

Stigma with calling them and saying, I need your help kind of thing, but it's not like that. Even when I'm trying to explain this to other families, they're like; you tried to use a subsidy? They don't understand a lot of people qualify for it.

If price is a problem, which actually we're in the middle of the process right now applying for CCSP, the Child Care Subsidy Program is incredibly helpful. A lot of the families that I serve actually use CCSP.

My child support case worker actually gave me, because I'm on a grant because I have an open child support case, so they gave me a list of places that would accept the grant.

Implications

The data gathered in these discussions aligns with other research in that the search for quality child care is not easy and once found; availability and affordability are additional challenges. As with other consumer services, parents want to gather information, narrow down to a 'choice set' and have the ability to compare providers. They want to be able to 'shop' online based on the providers' services (facility, curriculum, etc.) pricing and independent reviews. Their actual search and shopping experiences fall far short of these desires with heavy reliance on word-of-mouth, looking near home and work, and personal visits. There is demand and opportunity for independent online child care resources.

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