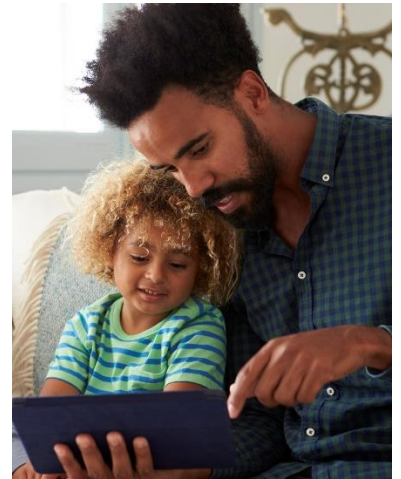




The Search for Child Care

Summary of Findings from Family Voices
*Focus Group: **California***



September 2016

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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.

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:

- 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.

Los Angeles County provided an urban backdrop for this research. Child Care Resource Center assisted in the coordination and hosting of the focus group. The discussion composed of 10, mostly urban parents identifying as low-income and many indicating a Hispanic/Latino background.

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

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 insights gained during the focus group.

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

Insights from Families: California

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 options during pregnancy.
2. In California the child care search was most likely to begin online. While the various online resources mentioned were not trusted implicitly, they are a helpful first step in identifying and narrowing down choices. 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.
3. Word-of-mouth recommendation is very important but 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 California. 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 mention of using a provider's sponsored social media page to get information.
4. Compared to other locations, parents in California were less focused on cost of child care when looking at their options. There was more focus on the day-to-day schedule and the teacher qualifications. Cost was still an important factor in the decision, but was less likely to be the first and main deciding factor.

Overall, 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.

Detailed Findings

Timing and Triggers

- **The search for childcare often begins while mothers are still pregnant.** Many respondents in these groups began to search for childcare 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 and triggers to

look for child care. Knowing that you will need to return to work quickly motivates an early search while pregnant.

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

Gathering Initial Information

- **The first step in the search for a provider in California is often an online search.** More so than in the past (according to parents of older children) the search for options starts with or at least includes online searches. 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 California as compared to other cities included in the research.

	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	

- In the discussion among California parents, beginning the search with online sources such as general web searching, Yelp, and Facebook was a bit more prevalent than in other locations.

“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] website first.”

- **Once parents had an idea of a few places, looking for information online was often the next step.** Online information, particularly reviews and social media conversation, 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's 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 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.”

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

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

“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.”

Factors in Decision

- **Online is a good place to start, but does not give sufficient information to make a final decision. A good, gut level feeling matters most.** 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. While online resources were generally a place to start for many parents, trust is low among those type of resources.

“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.”

“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.”

- **While cost plays an important part in the decision of whether to seriously consider a provider, California parents expressed greater desire than was heard in other locations for information about the care their children would receive.** California parents mentioned cost as a factor and there was agreement throughout the group but the conversation mostly focused on things such as the upkeep of the facility/provider space, caregiver-child ratios, curriculum, structure

of the day, and so on. The environment of the facility especially is important to parents in helping them to feel comfortable leaving their child there for the day. Cleanliness of the facility was important for parents as well.

“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.”

“Ratio, child to instructor ratio in their care.”

“How do they help the kids transition in the beginning of the day and get them comfortable leaving their parents?”

“Their teaching philosophy. If they are trained teachers or is it just people who took one child development class.”

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

Supporting Parents’ Search

- **Parents want to hear about potential child care facilities a multitude of ways.** Information available online and in-person conversations stood out as ways parents want to receive information about childcare centers. 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. Parents in California also mentioned seeing photos online as a way to help them feel more comfortable with a facility and its staff.

“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 always like to take a tour, that’s the best for me. Prior to that, it’s word of mouth, if I’m at an event with other moms we chat about it and any how they like it.”

“Having a well-developed website is nice. Having all the details online for me to see. Just like a quick page of all the details online.”

“I would want to see pictures, what the kids are doing and like whether the facility is clean and they are taking care of the place. Also, regular prices, who are their teachers and staff? Maybe even pictures of the teachers, not to be judgmental but just to see what they look like and how they present themselves.”

“I would appreciate a picture of the teachers, and maybe some detail about them. Their education, how many years they've been doing it, a little personal touch or something.”

Bottom Line Trust of Sources

- **Parents in California 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. Only one parent in California mentioned that they trusted online reviews.

“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.”

“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.”

“Other people's input or reviews...on Yelp or Facebook. If a lot of people are saying positive things about the daycare that's going to make you feel a little bit more comfortable to go in and leave my baby there.”

- **Although they may be looking at online resources, these are not genuinely trusted sources among the majority of respondents in California.** When asked to name the sources they trust least when making a decision about child care, online search and reviews were top of mind for most parents. Often in the discussion when one participant mentioned skepticism about Facebook or other sources, there was a lot of head-nodding and general agreement.

“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.”

- 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.

“Some people are really dramatic. You kind of just have to sort through the crazies. But in the end, you just have to visit the site itself in order to get a gut feeling about the place for your children.”

Implications

The data gathered in the California discussion align 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 referral resources.

For related research, read our Family Voices Driving Quality Choices white paper.

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