



The Search for Child Care

*Summary of Findings from Family Voices
Focus Group: **Kansas/Missouri***



September 2016

Acknowledgment: Research made possible by the generous support of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

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 shopping for child care, the factors that matter in their 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.

The Family Conservancy assisted in the coordination and hosting of the focus group on the Kansas and Missouri 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. Some of the participants also are parent leaders for Head Start. It is important to bear in mind that respondents had a pre-existing relationship with the CCR&R agency, and the agency may or may not have assisted with finding child care.

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

Insights from Families: Kansas/Missouri

1. Similar to parents in other locations, these respondents 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.
2. The search for child care often begins with word-of-mouth and this is not restricted to in-person conversations. Social media also plays a role for parents when searching and reviewing options as a way to get recommendations from trusted sources (personal social networks) and to gather feedback about options they are considering (through extended social networks/groups they have joined). In fact, Facebook was the single most mentioned resource in all the discussion groups including this one.
3. Kansas/Missouri parents generally were unsatisfied with the results of online searches through Google and Yelp. 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. 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.
4. 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. At the end of the day, Kansas/Missouri parents say there is no substitution for going to the site and speaking with the care provider in-person.

Detailed Findings

Timing and Triggers

- **The search for childcare often begins while mothers are still pregnant.** Many respondents in Kansas/Missouri 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.”

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

“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.”

Gathering Initial Information

- **The first step in search for a provider starts with word-of-mouth from friends and family. This word-of-mouth is sought through personal conversation and social media connections.** Parents in Kansas/Missouri 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 played 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 online sources in Kansas/Missouri:

	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 Mentions in each Discussion	28	17	58	28	

- Representative comments from participants in Kansas/Missouri include:

“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 TFCs delegates, and she saved my life.”

“Before I got my kid into the one I wanted, I just read their reviews on Google. I didn't go, I didn't waste time. If there were too many bad reviews, I just didn't go.”

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

“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.”

“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.”

Factors in Decision

- **Online is a good place to start, but does not give sufficient information to make a final decision.** Even though parents 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 in Kansas/Missouri, but in the end, trust is low among those types of resources.

“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.”

“Going in and talking to people in real time is the best way.”

- **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. Many parents in Kansas/Missouri agreed with the view that online reviews shape but don’t define their perceptions of a provider.

“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.”

- **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. In addition, there was mixed experience with state assistance programs that give financial aid to help with child care:

“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.”

- **Among Kansas/Missouri parents who were aware of state assistance programs, there were mixed reviews 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 could give them:

“The staff at [local medial center], and 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.”

- **Other parents mentioned the embarrassment or stigma** associated with social services such as a child care resource center when asked why families might not reach out to get help:

“Embarrassment.”

“They just don’t know.”

“The only thing that deterred me was being denied the first time.”

- **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, simulation 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. In Kansas/Missouri, there was also an appreciation of bilingual providers for those in dual-language households.

“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.”

“How do they deal with the kids that have allergies to different things?”

- **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 as one parent in Kansas/Missouri specifically mentioned:

“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."

Bottom Line Trust of Sources

- **Parents in Kansas/Missouri 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, Kansas/Missouri parents also try to hear from their children on their experience with a facility. Outside of that, they talked to their children to gain some perspective on what goes on in the 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."

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

- **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 Kansas/Missouri parents. 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."

- 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.

Implications

The data gathered in the Kansas/Missouri discussion discussions align with the other cities included in the research. Kansas/Missouri 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.

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

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