



The Search for Child Care

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



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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, the 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.

In Maine, the Maine Children's Alliance assisted in the coordination and hosting of the focus group. The focus group was composed of seven mostly rural parents from lower income brackets. This group contained a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds and some participants reported experiencing homelessness, teenage parenthood, new American status, and parents of a child with special needs.

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 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.

Insights from Families: Maine

1. Finding child care is a top-of-mind consideration for most parents interviewed and anecdotally, some parents in Maine mentioned that child care was a decision made after their child was born while others started searching while pregnant.
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 of children with special needs.
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. While the urban groups were more likely to talk about online sources, they were mentioned and used by some in Maine, the most rural discussion group. While Maine parents didn't rely on online information as much as other cities, there was a strong desire for online information to be more readily available.
5. Maine parents were the least likely to turn to online sources as a first step in searching for child care. 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.

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.

"I was pregnant when I started thinking about it – probably a few months before I had him."

- However, several 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.

“Mine was actually after I had my second child, we needed it then.”

“A couple years before they were going into preschool... it was more like preschool than childcare.”

Gathering Initial Information

- **The first step in search for a provider starts with word-of-mouth from friends and family.** Parents in Maine said their first step in finding the right child care arrangement was to ask around to friends and family. To some degree the search for options included going to online sources as well. Yelp reviews were mentioned and 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 sources in Maine, compared to other cities included in the study.

	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	

Factors in Decision

- **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 may help them find places to consider, but in the end, trust is low among those type of resources.

“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.”

- Online reviews help identify some candidates for consideration and weed out others. Across locations parents say a negative online review makes them less

inclined to visit the site themselves. Positive reviews were helpful when trying to decide which facilities deserved further investigation.

“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.”

- **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 Maine. 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.”

- 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.”

- **Beyond costs, parents in Maine 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. While licensing was only mentioned specifically in one group, parents in Maine were interested in learning more about the teachers/staff and their backgrounds in child care.

“Quality, safety, price, we pay by the day, hours, availability, ages of children 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.”

- In addition, **schedule and hours of coverage are critical and were mentioned in Maine** where parents might be traveling quite a distance for work or to find child care.

“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?”

- **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.

“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.”

Supporting Parents' Search

- **Parents in Maine 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 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 in Maine 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 parents in Maine 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 [social service agency] 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.”

Role of Social Services and Agencies

- There were mixed reviews in Maine 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.”

“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.”

Bottom Line Trust of Sources

- **Parents in Maine 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.** Outside of that, parents trusted other family members and friends who may have had their children in the same facility.

“Other families that have used the child care provider.”

- Although they may be looking at online resources, these are not genuinely trusted sources. 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 in Maine. 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.

“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.”

“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?”

- 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 these discussions 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 resources.

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

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